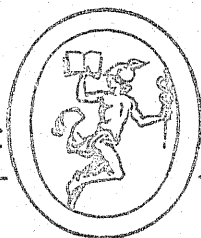


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The Short Reign of
Pippin IV

JOHN STEINBECK



Blue Camellia

FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES



Onionhead

WELDON HILL



My Family and
Other Animals

GERALD DURRELL

BOOKS ABRIDGED, INC. *New York*

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The Short Reign of Pippin IV

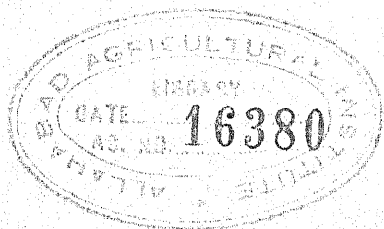
JOHN STEINBECK



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

Since 1929, JOHN STEINBECK has published twenty-five various works ranging from "Bombs Away," an Air Force training book, to "The Grapes of Wrath," the Pulitzer Prize winning novel. Mr. Steinbeck was born in 1902 in a region of Southern California now known as "the Steinbeck country." He specialized in marine biology at Stanford University, but left before taking a degree. He now has a house in New York City, his headquarters between roving abroad and periodic visits to his Monterey country, where he always keeps the latch off on a modest box of a house his father gave him when he started writing.

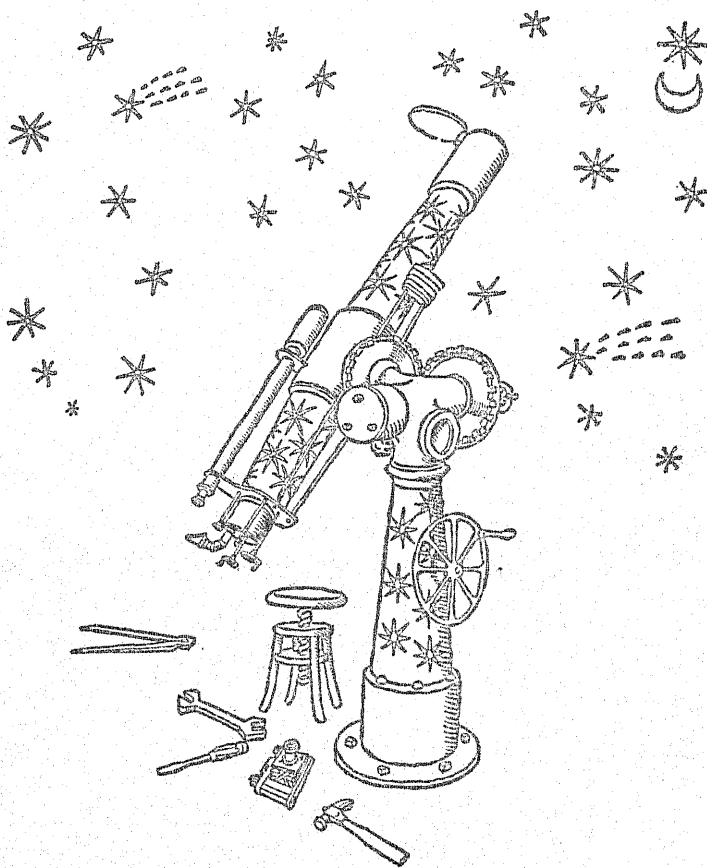


THE SHORT REIGN OF PIPPIN IV—
John Steinbeck

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Number One Avenue de Marigny in Paris is a large, square house of dark and venerable appearance. The mansion is on the corner where de Marigny crosses the Avenue Gabriel, a short block from the Champs Elysées and across the street from the Elysée Palace, which is the home of the President of France. Number One abuts on a glass-roofed courtyard, on the other side of which is a tall and narrow building, once the stables and coachmen's quarters. On the ground level are still



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the stables, very elegant with carved marble mangers and water troughs, but upstairs there are three pleasant floors, a small but pleasant house in the center of Paris. On the second floor large glass doors open on the unglassed portion of the courtyard which connects the two buildings.

Number One is presently owned and occupied by a noble French family who for a number of years have leased the converted coach house, the use of the courtyard, and half of the flat connecting roof to M. Pippin Arnulf Hérístal and his family, consisting of his wife, Marie, and his daughter, Clotilde. Soon after leasing the stable house, M. Hérístal called on his noble landlord and requested permission to set up the base and mount for an eight-inch refracting telescope on the portion of the flat roof to which he had access. This request was granted.

The Hérístal income was almost perfect of its kind for a Frenchman. It derived from certain eastward-facing slopes near Auxerre, on the Loire, on which the vines sucked the benevolence from the early sun and avoided the poisons of the afternoon, and this, together with a fortunate soil and a cave of perfect temperature, produced a white wine tasting like the odor of spring wildflowers—a wine which, while it did not travel well, had no need, for its devotees made pilgrimage to it. This estate, while small, was perhaps the very best of a holding once very great. Furthermore, it was cultivated and nurtured by tenants expert to the point of magic, who moreover paid their rent regularly and had, generation by generation. M. Hérístal's income was far from great, but it was constant and it permitted him to live comfortably in the coach house of Number One Avenue de Marigny.

Indeed, if Pippin Hérístal could have chosen the life he would most like to live, he would have spoken, with very few changes, for the life he was living in February of 19—. He was fifty-four, lean, handsome, and healthy in so far as he knew. By that I mean his health was so good that he was not aware he had it.

His wife, Marie, was a good wife and a good manager who

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knew her province and stayed in it. She was buxom and pleasant. Like most Frenchwomen of her class, she hated waste and heretics, considering the latter a waste of good heavenly material. She admired her husband without trying to understand him and had a degree of friendship with him which is not found in those marriages where passionate love sets torch to peace of mind. Her duty as she saw it was to keep a good, clean, economical house for her husband and her daughter, to do what she could about her liver, and to maintain the spiritual payments on her escrowed property in Heaven. These activities took up all her time. Her emotional overflow was absorbed by an occasional fight with the cook, Rose, and her steady warfare with wine-merchant and grocer, who were cheats and pigs, and, at certain times of the year, ancient camels. Madame's closest friend and perhaps only confidante was Sister Hyacinthe, of whom there will be more later.

The Hérystal household was carefully keyed to the family income, which was sufficient for the pleasant but frugal life which Pippin and Madame preferred to live. Monsieur's main extravagance lay in the instruments of astronomy. His telescope of more than amateur power was equipped with mounting of sufficient weight and stability to overcome oscillation, and mechanism to compensate for the earth's turning. Some of Pippin's celestial photographs have appeared in the magazine *Match*, and properly so, for he is given credit for discovering the comet of 1951, designated the Elysée Comet.

The family Hérystal was blessed with only one child—Clotilde, twenty years old, intense, violent, pretty, and overweight. Her background was interesting. At an early age she had revolted against everything she could think of. At fourteen, Clotilde determined to be a doctor of medicine; at fifteen she wrote a novel entitled *Adieu Ma Vie*, which sold widely and was made into a motion picture. As a result of her literary and cinemagraphic success she toured America and returned to France wearing blue jeans, saddle oxfords, and a man's shirt, a style which instantly caught on with millions of gamines who

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for several years were known as "Les Jeannes Bleues" and caused untold pain to their parents. It was said that Les Jeannes Bleues were, if anything, sloppier and more frowzy than the Existentialists, while their stern-faced gyrations in le jitterbug caused many a French father to clench agonized fists over his head.

On February 14, a celestial accident occurred which had a sharp effect on the Hérystal household. A pre-equinoctial meteor shower put in an untimely and unpredicted appearance. Pippin worked frantically with the glazing heavens, exposing film after film, but even before he retired to his darkroom in the wine cellar off the stable he knew that his camera was not adequate to stop the fiery missiles in their flight. The developed film verified his fear. Cursing gently, he walked to a great optical supply house, conferred with the management, telephoned several learned friends. Then he strolled reluctantly back to Number One Avenue de Marigny.

Madame was concluding an argument with Rose, the cook, as Pippin climbed the stairs. She emerged from the kitchen, victorious and a little red in the face.

In the salon she told her husband, "Closed the window over the cheese—a full kilogram of cheese suffocating all night with the window closed. And do you know what her excuse was? She was cold. For her own comfort the cheese must strangle. You can't trust servants any more."

"Madame—the meteor shower continues. This is verified. I find I must procure a new camera."

The outgo of money was definitely in Madame's province.

Her voice was steel. "The cost of this—this camera, Monsieur?"

He named a price which shook her sturdy frame as though an internal explosion had occurred. But almost immediately she marshaled herself with iron discipline for the attack.

"Last month, M'sieur, it was a new—what do you call it? The expenditure for film is already ruinous. May I remind you, M'sieur, of the letter recently arrived from Auxerre, of the need

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for new cooperage, of the insistence that we stand half of the cost?"

"Madame," he cried, "I did not call down the meteor shower."

"Nor did I decay the casks at Auxerre."

"I have no choice, Madame."

She seemed to grow to a tower with castellations, and darkness hung about her like a personal thunderstorm.

"M'sieur is master of the house," she said. "If M'sieur wishes to allow the meteors to bring bankruptcy down on the heads of his family—who am I to complain? But can one eat meteors, M'sieur? Can one wear them to keep out the night damp? Can one make wine barrels of these precious meteors? M'sieur, I leave you to make your choice." And she moved on quiet, deadly feet out of the room.

Pippin Hérystal walked sternly down the stairs. With furious dignity he crossed the courtyard and waited while the concierge opened the iron gate. In a moment of weakness he looked back and saw Madame watching him from the kitchen window.

"I am going to see Uncle Charlie," said Pippin Hérystal, and he slammed the iron gate behind him.

Charles Martel was proprietor of a small but prosperous art gallery and antique store in the Rue de Seine, a dark and pleasant place with pictures properly ill-lighted and provocative. He sold unsigned paintings which he would not guarantee as early Renoirs, and also bits of crystal, gilt, and chinoiserie which he could and did attest as coming from the great and ancient houses of France.

At the rear of the gallery a red velvet curtain concealed one of the most comfortable and discreet bachelor's quarters in all Paris. The chairs, softened by velvet cushions stuffed with down, were a joy to sit in. His bed, a triumph of Napoleonic work in gilded wood, had high curved head and foot like the prow and stern of a Viking dragon ship. During the day a cover and pillows made from softly faded altar cloths converted his

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sleeping arrangements into a charming nook, inviting and subtly sinful.

Charles had always been a worldly man, gentle but inflexible, of impeccable carriage and dress. When the custodian of an ancient name and a bat-ridden château required a relaxing day at Auteuil or a new lining for a fur-collared topcoat, where was there a better place to take the crystal chandelier from the ball-room or the inlaid piquet table once the property of a king's mistress than to the gallery of Uncle Charlie?

Charles Martel was the uncle and friend of Pippin Arnulf Héristal. Also he was his nephew's adviser in matters spiritual and temporal.

When M. Héristal stormed into the gallery in the Rue de Seine, Charles noted that he had come in a taxi. The mission was therefore serious.

Charles gestured his nephew past the velvet curtain and quickly concluded the sale of a Louis Quinze make-up box to an elderly lady tourist for whom it had no practical value. He closed the negotiation not by lowering the price but by suddenly raising it, which convinced the lady that she should buy it at once or she wouldn't get it at all. Charles bowed her out of the gallery, shut the front door, and hung a battered card which read "Closed for Renovation." Then he himself went past the velvet curtain and greeted his pacing nephew.

"You are troubled, my child," he said. "Sit down, sit down. Let me give you a drop of cognac for your nerves."

"I am in a fury," Pippin said, but he did sit down and he did accept the cognac.

"It is about money?"

"It is about money," said Pippin. "But I did not come to borrow."

"You come, then, to complain?"

"Exactly, to complain."

"A good idea. It removes pressures. Do you wish to be specific in your complaint?"

Pippin said, "An unpredicted meteor shower has blundered

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into earth's atmosphere. My camera is not adequate to—well, I need a new camera.”

“Expensive, and Marie does not find it necessary?”

“You understand the situation very well. Understand, my uncle, it is unusual to find showers of meteors at this season. Who knows what is going on up there? Do not forget that it was I who first reported the Elysée Comet. I was commended by the Academy. It is whispered that in the not too distant future I may be elected.”

“Congratulations, my child. What an honor! While I myself do not view the heavens with passion, I support passion, whatever its source. Begin your complaint, my dear nephew. Now—I am Marie and you are you. Shall we start with the undeniable fact that your income springs from your property, rather than from *dot*?”

“Exactly.”

“This land has belonged to your family since the dawn of history.”

“Since the Salic Franks invaded from the east.”

“You stem from a family so ancient, so noble, that you do not condescend to remind the upstart nobility of your origin by the use of titles clearly yours.”

“You put it very well, Uncle Charlie. And all I want is a new camera.”

“Let me lend you the money for the camera, my child. You can pay it back little by little. Marie does not shy at little things—it is large expenditures which frighten and confuse her.”

“I did not come to borrow.”

“You have not asked. I have offered. You will purchase the camera. You will inform Marie that you have decided not to buy it. Does Marie know one camera from another?”

“Of course not. But will I not have surrendered my position in the house?”

“Quite the contrary, my child. You will have put her in a position of guilt. She will urge you to buy many little things. Thus you will repay the loan.”

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"I wonder you have never married."

"I prefer to see other people happy. Now—for what amount shall I make the check?"

When M. Hérystal had slammed the iron gate, Madame, for all her cold and deadly triumph, was shaken and uncertain—and at such times it was her habit to visit her old friend Sister Hyacinthe in her convent not far from the Porte de Vincennes—a large, low, orderly building within sight of the Bois.

Sister Hyacinthe had been her childhood friend and moreover they had gone to school together. Suzanne Lescault was a pretty child, with a thin, true singing voice and a natural ability as a dancer so that she dominated the pageants and little plays of the school. Inevitably Suzanne rose from wood sprite to fairy queen to Pierrette, and later, for three successive years, she acted *Joan the Maid* to the complete satisfaction of its authoress, the Sister Superior.

In the normal course of events Suzanne would have married and retired her talents and her blossoming figure. However, a distant manipulation of the Crédit Lyonnais and the subsequent suicide of her father, an officer in that organization, left Suzanne with a sickly mother, and the necessity for making her way in the world. Only then did the often heard comment that she should be on the stage make some sense to Suzanne and more to her mother.

The Comédie Française had no immediate openings but took her name, and while she waited Suzanne was employed by the Folies Bergère, where her voice, her grace, and her high and perfect bosom were instantly appreciated and utilized. Her mother's professional illness made it economically unsound for Suzanne to jeopardize a permanent and well-paid position for the uncertainty of higher art.

For many years she graced the stage of the Folies, not only in the line of lovely undressed girls, but also with speaking, singing, and dancing parts. After twenty years of complicated and complaining illness, her mother died without a single symptom. By

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this time Suzanne had become not only a performer but ballet mistress.

She was very tired. Her bosom had remained high; her arches had fallen.

Suzanne wanted to rest her feet. She left a world about which she knew perhaps too much and after a proper novitiate took the veil as Sister Hyacinthe in an order of contemplation which demanded a great deal of sitting down.

During all the years of both her lives she had maintained contact with her old school friend Marie who still adored her talented and now saintly friend. It was perfectly natural that she called upon her in the matter of the camera.

In the tidy and comfortable little visiting room of the convent near Vincennes, Marie said, "I am at my wit's end. In most things M'sieur is as considerate as one could wish, but where his ill-named stars are concerned he pours out money like water."

Sister Hyacinthe smiled at her. "Why don't you beat him?" she asked pleasantly.

"Pardon? Oh! I see you make a jollity. I assure you it is a serious matter. The cooperage at Auxere—"

"Is there food on the table, Marie? Is the rent paid? Have they cut off the electricity?"

"It is a matter of principle and of precedent," said Marie a little stiffly.

"My dear friend," said the nun, "I have had contacts with many men. I think I am in a position to make some generalities about them. First, they are like children, sometimes spoiled children."

"Now there I agree with you."

"The ones who really truly grow up, Marie, are no good because men are either children or old—there is nothing in between. But in their childlike unreason and irresponsibility there is sometimes greatness. Please understand that I know most women are more intelligent, but women grow up, women face realities—and women are very rarely great. One of the few

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regrets I have in my present profession is the lack of male nonsense. It at least makes for contrast," said Sister Hyacinthe.

"He discovered a comet," said Marie. "The Academy commended him. But this new camera business—that goes too far."

"Do you want my advice?"

"Of course."

"Then advise him to buy the camera—insist on it."

"But I have already taken my stand. I would lose his respect."

"On the contrary," said Sister Hyacinthe, "if you should advise the expenditure, even suggest a greater one, you might find a reluctance on his part to spend the money. He might then have to inspect realities instead of simply opposing you. They are very curious creatures, men."

When Madame returned to Number One Avenue de Marigny she found the double doors of the salon open and her husband busy with small shining tools at his telescope.

"I have been thinking," she said. "It occurs to me that you should buy the camera."

"You are kind," said her husband. "But I too have been thinking. First things must come first. No, I will get along with what I have."

"I implore you."

"No," he said.

"I command it."

"My dear, let us not be confused about who is the head of this house. Do not let us, like the Americans, hear the hens crowing."

"Forgive me," said Marie.

"It is nothing, Madame."

Clotilde sauntered down the stairs, her dress a little tight over her growing inches.

"You are going out, my dear?" Madame asked.

"Oh, yes, Maman. I am having a screen test."

"Not another one!"

"One does as one's director suggests," said Clotilde.

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When their daughter had oozed away down the stairs and the gate to the courtyard had clanged behind her, Madame said, "I liked it almost better when she was writing novels. She was at home more often. In a way I will be glad when she finds a nice boy of good family."

The events of 19— in France should be studied not for their uniqueness but rather for their inevitability. The study of history, while it does not endow with prophecy, may indicate lines of probability.

It was and is no new thing for a French government to fall for lack of a vote of confidence. What has been called in other countries "instability" is in France a kind of stability.

Many millions of words partisan and passionate have been written about the recent French crisis and re-crisis. It remains to trace the process with the cool and appraising eye of the historian.

On February 12, 19—, when M. Rumorgue was finally placed in the position of asking for a vote on the issue of Monaco, it is conceded that he knew the result in advance. Indeed, there were many around him who felt he welcomed the termination of his premiership. M. Rumorgue, in addition to his titular leadership of the Proto-Communist party, which is traditionally two degrees right of center, is an authority in psycho-botany. To accept the premiership at all, he had reluctantly abandoned for the time being the experiment concerning pain in plants which he had been carrying on for many years at his nursery at Juan les Pins.

The question on which M. Rumorgue's government failed, while interesting, was not nationally important. It is widely believed that if the Monaco question had not arisen, some other difficulty would have taken its place. The parties involved at this time should be listed, since some of them have since disappeared and been replaced by others. Gathered in the Elysée Palace were:

The Conservative Radicals

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The Radical Conservatives

The Royalists

The Right Centrists

The Left Centrists

The Christian Atheists

The Christian Christians

The Christian Communists

The Proto-Communists

The Neo-Communists

The Socialists

and

The Communists

The Communists were broken up into:

Stalinists

Trotskyists

Krushchevniks

Bulganinians

For three days the struggle raged. The leaders slept on the brocade couches of the Grand Ballroom and subsisted on the bread and cheese and Algerian wine furnished by M. le Président.

But at the end of seven days the conference had accomplished nothing.

Great historic decisions often result from small and even flippant causes. Well into the second week, the leaders of the larger political parties found that their voices, which had gone from loud to harsh to hoarse, were finally disappearing completely.

It was at this time that the compact group of the leaders of the Royalist party took the floor. Having had no hope of being included in any new government, they had abstained from making speeches, and thus had kept their voices. After the confusion of eight days of meetings, the calm of the Royalists was by contrast explosive.

The Comte de Terrefranque advanced to the rostrum and announced in a clear, loud voice that the Royalist group had

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joined forces. He himself, he said, in spite of his basic and unchanging loyalty to the Merovingian line, from which his title derived, had agreed to join the Bourbons, not from lack of respect and love for his own great tradition, but simply because the Merovingians were not able to produce a prince of clear and direct descent. He therefore introduced the Duc des Troisfronts, whose proposal would have the backing not only of the other Royalist parties but also of the noble and intelligent people of France.

The Duc des Troisfronts, who under ordinary circumstances was shielded from public appearances, because of the split palate which has been his family's chief characteristic for many generations, now took the stand and was able to make himself not only heard but even understood. He suggested, even commanded, that the monarchy be restored so that France might rise again like the phoenix out of the ashes of the Republic to cast her light over the world.

The announcement by the Duc des Troisfronts had the effect of shocking the party leaders to silence. Every man seemed frozen within himself. Only very gradually did a series of whispered conferences begin. Party leaders collected in knots and spoke together in low tones, glancing occasionally over their shoulders.

M. Deuxcloches, actual leader of the Communist bloc, although he himself holds only the humble party position of Cultural Custodian, seems to have been the first to realize the implications of the proposal of des Troisfronts.

To his group, M. Deuxcloches argued as follows. The Communist party's natural function was revolution, he said. Any change which made revolution more feasible was undeniably to the party's advantage. French politics were in a state of anarchy. It is very difficult to revolt against anarchy, since in the popular mind, undialectically informed, revolution *is* anarchy. There is no point, to the uninstructed, in substituting anarchy, for anarchy. On the other hand, he continued, monarchy is the natural magnet for revolution, as can be historically verified. There-

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fore, it would be to the Communists' advantage if the French monarchy were restored. Once the king was crowned, it would be time to announce that France had been misled by unkept promises and imperialist pressures. Meanwhile, definite work toward the revolution could proceed.

His statement drew applause and instant agreement.

Meanwhile, there had been other conferences among other partisans. It was obvious to the Socialists, for example, that a king would keep the Communists in check. With that stumbling block out of the way, the Socialists could look forward to the gradual change which was their advocacy.

The Christian Atheists agreed together that under the present scattering of parties, with resulting confusion, the unfused Church was making inroads. Monarchy, on the other hand, was the natural enemy of the Church Militant; England was the perfect example of popular monarchy's successful stand against inroads of Rome.

The Christian Christians took the position that the royal family had always been unequivocally Catholic, while the aristocracy, particularly those members stemming from the Ancien Régime, if they had not deviated in adversity would not be likely to do so once their dream had come true.

The Left Centrists are a powerful force, particularly when they are able to find a common ground with the right Centrists. These two parties represent not only mining and manufacturing, but also banking and insurance and real estate, the only difference between them being that the Left Centrists favor retirement and medical provisions common to American corporations, while the Right Centrists do not. These two parties were able to agree almost immediately on restoration of the monarchy, because a king would undoubtedly curb both Socialists and Communists and in so doing would put an end to demands for pay increases and shorter hours.

The Non-Tax-Payers' League concluded that a Royalist regime would collect taxes from Right and Left Centrists, and this was their main reason for being. They were quite aware that

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the projected monarchy would not collect taxes from the aristocracy, but they argued that this was a very small group and moreover bankrupt so that it was not important if Royalists were exempt.

There grew up a unanimity of direction among the political parties unique in recent history. Each group favored the restoration of the monarchy for different reasons and for reasons beneficial to itself.

While the National Assembly debated the return of the monarchy with increasing fervor and approval, the Royalists met in a hall which had once housed the Czech Social Gymnastic and Oratory Club and been abandoned after the *Anschluss* with the Soviet Union.

No one could have foreseen any difficulty. The Bourbon Pretender was available, legitimate, and trained for his position. Fortunately, he had not been asked to the meeting. There were present:

Vercingetorians

Merovingians

Carolingians

Capetians

Burgundians

Orleanists

Bourbons

Bonapartists

And two very small groups—

Angevins, who were rumored to have British support, and
Caesarians, who claimed their descent from Julius and
bore the bend sinister proudly.

The Bourbons walked like emperors and smiled little Bourbon smiles when the king's health was drunk. But when they named their Pretender, the Comte de Paris—all hell broke loose.

Bonapartists leaped up, their eyes wild. Comte de Jour, whose great-grandfather had carried his marshal's baton in his knapsack, cried, "Bourbon! Why Bourbon? Gentlemen, are we

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to live under the shadow of Bourbon and Orleans, the two lines which contributed most to the fall of the French monarchy? Are we—?"

"Better the Merovingians, better the Rois Fainéants," shrieked the Capetians.

For a day and a night the battle raged while noble voices grew hoarse and noble hearts pounded. Of all the aristocratic partisans, only the Merovingians sat back, quiet, listless, content, and faint.

It was mid-morning of the second day when exhaustion proclaimed to all the undeniable fact that the Royalists could no more settle on a king than the Republicans could form a government.

At 10:37 A.M., February 21, 19—, the elderly Childéric de Saône stood gradually up and spoke softly in his dusty Merovingian voice, which nevertheless was one of the few voices left.

"My noble friends," he began, "as you know, I adhere to a dynasty which does not admit that you exist. My kings, it is recorded, disappeared through lassitude. We Merovingians do not want the crown. Consequently, perhaps we are in a position to arbitrate—to advise." He smiled wanly. "It seems apparent that Bourbon, Orleans, Burgundy, even cadet Capet, can only reign by the old method of decimation. I suggest, therefore, that we go farther back. I suggest for the throne of France the holy blood of Charlemagne."

Bourbon exploded in a thunderous whisper. "Are you insane? The line has disappeared."

"Not so," said Childéric quietly. "You will recall, noble sirs, although at the time your ancestors were herding sheep, that Pippin II of Héristal, ignoring the Salic custom of partition, gave all his realm to his son Charles—later called the Hammer."

"What of it?" Bourbon demanded. "There is no issue now."

"Not from Charles Martel, no. But I ask you also to remember that Charles was illegitimate. Perhaps this has blinded you

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to the fact that Pippin II had two legitimate sons and these he passed over *de jure*, but could he, did he have the power *in esse* or *defacto*?

"In Paris today lives Pippin Arnulf Hérístal, a pleasant man, an amateur astronomer, while his Uncle Charles Martel is proprietor of a small gallery in the Rue de Seine.

"Pippin is an old friend of mine. He lives on the proceeds of two vineyards, the last remnant of the monster estates of Hérístal and Arnulf. Noble sirs, I have the honor to propose that we unite under His Gracious Majesty Pippin of Hérístal and Arnulf, of the line of Charlemagne."

The die was cast, although the whispering went on until weary evening proved that no other agreement was possible.

Finally the nobility concurred. They even tried to cheer—to cheer the king. They succeeded in drinking his health and they carried the name and origin of Pippin to the floor of the National Assembly, where it was received with relieved enthusiasm, for it had already occurred to the more astute representatives of the French people that 1789 was not so long ago. But who could hate Hérístal—or Charlemagne?

M. Hérístal was one of very few in France, perhaps in the world, who were not aware that the Republic had been voted out of existence and the French Monarchy proclaimed. It follows that he was also ignorant that he himself had been elected by acclamation King of France with the name Pippin IV. Pippin the Short, son of Charles Martel, who died in 768 A.D., was considered to have been Pippin III.

When the triumphant committee bore the official will of the people of France to the house at Number One Avenue de Marigny at nine o'clock in the morning, M. Hérístal, in wine-colored dressing gown, was sitting in his study, drinking a cup of hot Sanka imported from America and preparing to go to bed.

He listened courteously, removing his pince-nez and rubbing his reddened eyes. At first he was wearily amused. But when

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"But they have gone insane, Uncle Charlie."

"No, my boy, abandon that theory. The French do not go insane unless there is some advantage in it. Now you say that the delegation was composed of all parties, and you further say that they mentioned the future well-being of France."

"They say France must have a stable government."

"Hmmm," said Uncle Charlie. "It has always seemed to me that this is the last thing they want. It is possible, Pippin, that the parties have chosen a direction, but for different reasons. Yes, that must be it, and you, my poor boy have been chosen for the role of what the Americans call a 'patsy.'"

"Can't I say no, Uncle Charlie? No, no, no, no! Why not?"

Uncle Charlie sighed. "I can think of two reasons now. Later, several more will come to me. In the first place, you will be told that France needs you. No one has ever been able to resist such a suggestion, here or elsewhere. If they tell you that France needs you, you are lost. You can only pray that France is not also lost."

"But maybe—"

"You see," said Uncle Charlie, "you are already caught. The second force is more subtle but no less powerful. It is the overwhelming numerical strength of the aristocracy."

"Aristocracy thrives and breeds most luxuriantly under democratic or republican regimes. At the same time, the lower orders seem to become sterile. You will find the best proof of this in America, where there is no single individual who is not descended from an aristocrat, where there is not even an Indian who is not a tribal chief. In republican France, to only a slightly lesser degree, the aristocracy has shown a fecundity beyond belief."

"They will be down on you like sparrows on a— No, I won't complete that simile. They will demand privileges unremembered since Louis the Ugly, but more than that, my dear child, they will want money."

Pippin said miserably, "What am I to do, Uncle Charlie?"

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Why couldn't it have waited a generation or two? Isn't there a collateral branch of the family who might—"

"No," said Charles, "there isn't. And there's another thing. If every Frenchman should oppose your accession to the monarchy, every Frenchwoman would force you to reign. Too long have they looked with craving eyes across the channel, sneered at the frumpiness of British royalty, and envied it.

"Pippin, my child, you are sunk," said Charles. "You are the royal patsy. I suggest that you search deeply in the situation for something to enjoy. And now I know you will excuse me. A client is coming in with three unsigned Renoirs."

Pippin said, "Well, anyway, I don't feel so alone, knowing that you will have to assume your titles."

"Name of a thrice-soiled name!" cried Uncle Charlie. "I had forgotten that!"

In a daze, Pippin left the gallery. He wandered blindly up-Seine on the Left Bank, past Notre-Dame, past warehouses, past wine storage, over bridges, past factories, and he did not look around until he came to Bercy.

During his long and slow preamble it is more than possible that his mind, like a rat in a laboratory maze, sought every possible avenue of escape, explored runways and aisles and holes, only to run against the wire netting of fact. Again and again he butted his mental nose against the screen at the end of a promising passage, and there was the fact. He was king and there was no escaping it.

In Bercy he stumbled wearily into a café, sat at a small marble table, observed, without seeing it, a passionate domino game, and, although it was not yet noon, he ordered a Pernod. He drank so rapidly and ordered another so promptly that the domino-players thought him a tourist and guarded their language.

With his third Pernod, Pippin was heard to say, "All right, then. All right, then." He swallowed his drink and waved for another and, when it came, he addressed his glass.

"So you want a king, my friends? But have you considered

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the danger? Do you know what you might have conjured up?" He turned to the domino-players. "Will you do me the honor of drinking a toast with me?" he demanded.

Sullenly they accepted. For an American, they thought, he spoke excellent French.

When they were served, Pippin raised his glass. "They want a king! I drink to the King! Long live the King!" He drained his glass. "Very well, my friends," he said. "It is just possible that they will *get* a king—and that's the last thing in the world they want. Yes, they may find they have a king on their hands." He got up from his table and moved to the door. It was noted that he had a slow and regal step.



Complex as it was to establish the monarchy, the actual crowning of the king at Reims proved even more difficult. Charles had been correct in his estimate of the increase in the numbers of the aristocracy under the Republic. Not only had the noblesse multiplied beyond all belief, but they could not agree on the actual form of the crowning. That it should take an ancient and traditional form was conceded, but which ancient form?

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Vitally interested groups demanded that the crowning be put off until the summer. The Couture was swamped with orders for court dresses. The ceramics industries needed time to make the millions of cups and plates and ashtrays and plaques bearing not only the royal arms, but the profile of the king and queen. The summer would bring a tidal wave of tourists, which alone would make the whole venture profitable.

Matters not previously contemplated became of vital importance. Newly appointed lords of protocol, kings-at-arms, nobles of the bedchamber, ladies in waiting, ran in circles, while the offices of the Royal Historians were lighted all night.

The museums were ransacked for coaches, for costumes, for flags. The libraries were turned inside out. The coinage had to be changed. There was no artist whose brush and palette could not find employment in repainting coats of arms and armorial bearings.

Carriage-makers, unemployed for half a lifetime, were dragged out of senile retirement to swell the spokes and felloes of state coaches and to direct the replacement of leather springs.

Armors relearned the burnishing and lubrication of gauntlets, of greaves, of visors, of basinets, for many of the younger peers insisted on attending the coronation armed cap-a-pie, regardless of the weather.

On all of this preparation Pippin looked with consternation. A delegation proposing to establish a company of Life Guards armed with halberds made him miss an eclipse of the moon. The clamors of the Hereditary Royal Order of Dwarfs drove him to seclusion in the rear of Uncle Charles's gallery.

"The Folies Bergère is holding a competition," he complained. "They are choosing a King's Mistress. Uncle Charlie, in my young days when it was expected of me, I went along with our national practice even though it was expensive and, after a while, boring. But now—do you know they have entries from every nation in the world? I won't do it."

"If you think you can be King of France without a mistress to enlighten your people with her extravagance and her charm-

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ing unreliability, you are very much mistaken," said Uncle Charlie. "It would be like going without your clothes. The French nation would not tolerate it."

The spring in Paris was traditionally beautiful. Production of all things royal and all things French caused factories to put on night shifts. An era of good feeling and security justified a reduction in wages.

As might have been expected, Madame took the change in her status with realism and vigor. To her it was like moving from one apartment to another—on a larger scale, of course, but having the same problems. Madame made lists. She complained that her husband did not take his duties as seriously as he should.

"You loll about the house," she said to him, "when anyone can see that there are a thousand things to be done."

"I know," said Pippin in the tone she knew meant he had not listened.

"While you have been daydreaming, have you given a single thought to your daughter?"

"What has she done now?" Pippin demanded.

It cannot be denied that Clotilde had led a rather unusual existence. When, at fifteen, she wrote the best-selling novel *Adieu Ma Vie*, she was sought out and courted by the most celebrated and complex minds of our times. She was acclaimed by the Reductionists, the Resurrectionists, the Protonists, the Non-Existentialists, and the Quantumists, while the very nature of her book set hundreds of psychoanalysts clamoring to sift her unconscious. She had her table at the Café des Trois Puces, where she held court and freely answered questions on religion, philosophy, politics, and aesthetics. It was at this very table that she started her second novel, which, while never finished, was to be titled "Le Printemps des Mortes." Her devotees formed the school called Clotildisme, which was denounced by the clergy and caused sixty-eight adolescents to commit ecstatic

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suicide by leaping from the top of the Arc de Triomphe. Then she went to Rome, where she acted in three versions of *War and Peace* and two of *Quo Vadis*, but her notices threw her into such despair that her elevation to Princess Royale came just in time. In this field the competition was less fierce.

Clotilde began to think of herself, at least pronominally, in the plural. She referred to "our people," "our position," "our duty." It was at this time that she fell madly in love with Tod Johnson.

Clotilde met him at Les Ambassadeurs.

He was the ideal American young man—tall, stiff-haired, blue-eyed, well dressed, well educated by going standards, well mannered, and soft-spoken. He was equally fortunate in his background. His father, H. W. Johnson, the Egg King, of Petaluma, California, was reputed to have two hundred and thirty million white leghorn chickens. Even more fortunate was the fact that H. W. was a poor man who had built his chicken kingdom by his own efforts.

It was only after several meetings with Clotilde that he told her about his father and the egg empire. By then she was so warm and gooey with love that she forgot to tell him her own family news.

Who could set down all the drama, the pageantry and glories, and, yes, the confusion of the coronation at Reims on July 15? Newspaper coverage ran to many millions of words. Color photographs filled the split-page of every newspaper with a circulation of over twenty thousand.

The New York *Daily News* front page carried a headline, of which each letter was four inches high, that read: FROGS CROWN PIP.

Every by-line writer and commentator in America was in attendance.

Conrad Hilton took this occasion to open the Versailles-Hilton.

The life story of every aristocrat in France was bought in advance.

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The reader should consult back issues of newspapers for accounts of the great day at Reims and Paris—the cathedral crowded to the doors, the cries of the scalpers, the stands of ceramics, the miniatures of royal coaches, the crush of people in the square, the traffic jam on the road to Reims, unparalleled even at the finish of the Tour de France.

The coronation itself was a triumph of disorder. It was discovered at the last moment that horses had not been provided to draw the state coaches, but this lack was filled by the abat-toirs of Paris, even though their gesture made certain sections of Paris meatless for three days.

The coronation was completed by eleven in the morning. Then the wave of spectators rushed back to Paris for the parade which was to move from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe. This state procession was scheduled for two o'clock. It started at five.

The procession was artfully arranged to represent past and present. First came the state carriages of the Great Peers, decorated with gold leaf and tumbling angels; then a battery of heavy artillery drawn by tractors; then a company of cross-bowmen in slashed doublets and plumed hats; then a regiment of dragoons with burnished breastplates; then a group of heavy tanks and weapon-carriers, followed by the Noble Youth in full armor. A battalion of paratroopers followed, armed with sub-machine guns, leading the king's ministers in their robes of office, and behind them a platoon of musketeers in lace, knee-breeches, silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes with great buckles. These last moved along regally, using their musket crutches as staffs.

At last the royal coach creaked by. Pippin IV, an uncomfortable bundle of purple velvet and ermine, with the queen, equally befurred, sitting beside him, acknowledged the cheers of the loyal bystanders and responded with equal courtesy to hisses.

When at last the royal coach reached the Arc de Triomphe, the streets about the Place de la Concorde were still blocked with marchers waiting to get into the parade. But all of this is

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a matter of public record and of unparalleled newspaper coverage.

As the royal coach paused at the Arc de Triomphe, Queen Marie turned to speak to the king and found him gone. He had propped up his royal robes and crept away unnoticed in the crowd.

The king paced back and forth in Charles Martel's room.

"I can't imagine how I let myself in for this," he said. "I didn't want to move to Versailles. I wasn't asked. I was moved. It's drafty there. Uncle Charlie. The beds are horrible. The floors creak. What are you mixing there?"

"A martini," said Uncle Charlie. "I've learned it from a young friend of Clotilde's, an American. The first taste is dreadful, but it becomes progressively more delicious. It has some of the hypnotic qualities of morphine. Try it! Don't let the ice frighten you."

"That's horrible," said the king and he drained the little glass. "Pour me another one, will you?" He licked his lips. "Say, what is in this? Gin I can taste, but what else?"

"Vermouth. Just a breath of vermouth. When they become delicious you've had too many. Try sipping this one, Sire. You are nervous, my child."

"What do you call them?"

"Martinis."

"Italian?"

"It isn't," said Uncle Charlie. "Pippin, I don't want you to leave me, but I think it only fair to warn you that Clotilde is bringing her new friend. If you would care to leave by the little rear door without being seen—"

"What friend is this?"

"An American friend. I thought he might be interested in some sketches."

"Uncle Charlie!"

"A man must live, my nephew."

"Are you going to use your position to cheat this American? Uncle Charlie, is that the noble thing to do?"

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"As a matter of fact, it is," said Charles Martel. "We invented it. I make no representations. If he likes a picture, he buys it. I simply say Boucher *might* have painted it. So he might. Anything is possible."

"But you are the king's uncle! To cheat a commoner, and an American commoner, at that, is—is like shooting sitting birds. He is rich?"

"He is what the Americans call 'loaded.' His father is the Egg King of a province called Petaluma."

"Well, at least you're not stealing from the—the lower orders."

"Indeed I am not, my child. In America one only becomes a member of the lower orders when one is insolvent."

"Uncle Charlie, if you're making another one of those what-do-you-call-thems, I think I will stay and meet this Egg Prince."

Clotilde was surprised to find her father in the back room of the Galerie Martel, but she said, "Sire, I wish to present Mr. Tod Johnson. Mr. Tod Johnson, this is my father"—she blushed—"the king."

"Glad to know you, Mr. King," said Tod.

Uncle Charlie said delicately, "Not Mister—the."

"Come again?" said Tod.

"Il n'est pas Monsieur King. Il est *Le Roi*."

"No kidding!" said Tod.

"He is very democratic," said Uncle Charlie.

"I voted the Democratic ticket," said Tod. "My old—my father would kill me if he knew. He's a Taft man."

Pippin spoke for the first time. "Correct me if I am wrong. Have I not heard that Monsieur Taft is dead?"

"That doesn't mean a thing to my father," said Tod. "Let's get this straight in my mind. What kind of a king?"

Pippin said, "I do not understand."

"I mean like—well, they call my father the Egg King, and Benny Goodman is the King of Swing, and like that."

"I am King of France," said the king. "It was not my choice of profession."

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"The hell you are!"

"The hell I'm not."

"How'd you learn talk like that, sir?"

"For a number of years I have subscribed to *Downbeat*," said Pippin.

"Well, that explains it." Tod turned to Uncle Charles. "Bugsy said you were doing something wrong with the martinis."

"They do not taste the same."

"Are you getting them cold enough? Here, let me mix you one. Will you have one too, sir?"

"Thank you. I should like to discuss with you your father, the king."

"Egg King."

"Exactly. Has he been this for a long time?"

"Since the depression. He hit bottom then. That was before I was born."

"Then he invented his kingdom as he went along?"

"You might say that, sir. And in his line there is nobody who can touch him."

"He has a principality, your father?"

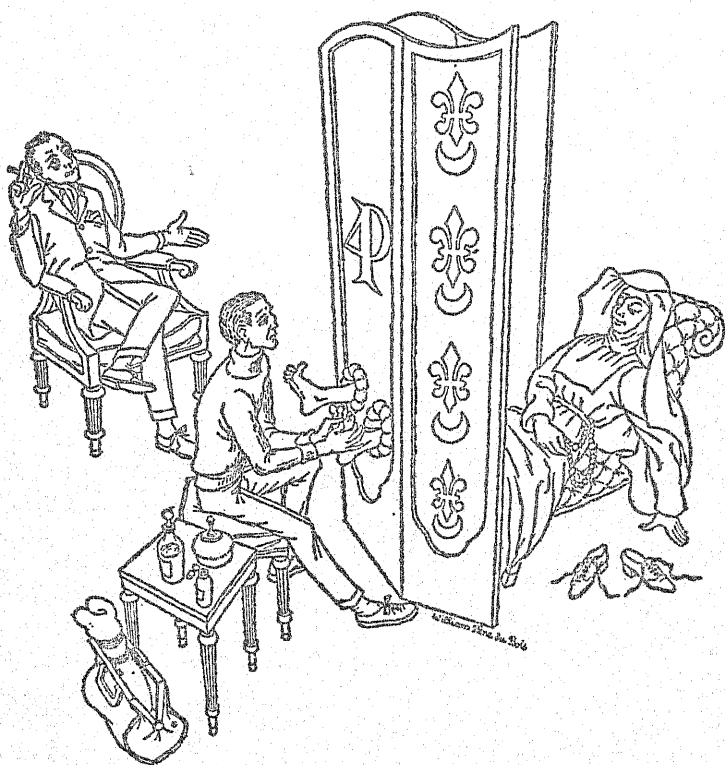
"Well, it's a corporation—kind of the same thing if you control the stock."

"My young friend, I hope you will come to see me very soon. I wish to discuss the king business with you."

"Where do you live, sir? Bugsy wouldn't ever tell me. I thought she was ashamed."

"Perhaps she was," said the king. "I live at the Palace at Versailles."

"Holy mackerel!" said Tod. "Wait till my old man hears this—"



As though in celebration of the king's return, the summer slipped benignly over France—warm, but not hot; cool, but not cold.

The rains waited until the flowers of the vines exchanged their pollen and set their clusters densely, and then gentle moisture stirred the growth. The earth gave sugar and the warm air breed. Before a single grape ripened, it was felt that, barring some ugly trick by nature, this would be a vintage year, the

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kind remembered from the time when an old man was young.

And the wheat headed full and yellow. The butter took an unearthly sweetness from the vintage grass. The farmers complained, as their duty demanded, but even their complaints had a cheerful tone.

From overseas the tourists boiled in and every one of them was rich and appreciative so that the porters were seen to smile—whether you believe it or not. Taxi drivers scowled in a good-humored way, and one or two were heard to say that perhaps ruin would not come this year, an admission they will not care to have repeated.

And what of the political groups now firmly rooted in the Privy Council? Even they had an era of good feeling. Christian Christians saw the churches full. Christian Atheists saw them empty.

The Socialists went happily about writing their own constitution for France.

The Communists were very busy explaining to one another a shift in the party line which seemed to place leadership in the hands of the people, a subtlety later to be explained and exploited. Besides this, the collective leadership in the Kremlin not only had congratulated the French Crown but had offered a tremendous loan.

The Non-Tax-Payers' League was lulled to a state of bliss, since not only Russia but America advanced a loan which made it unnecessary to collect any taxes at all.

Right and Left Centrists were so confident of the future that they freely suggested a rise in prices together with a lowering of wages, and no riots ensued, which proved to most people that the Communists had indeed been defanged.

To such a stable government there was no end to the loans America was happy to advance. The outpouring of American money had the effect of strengthening the Royalist parties of Portugal, Spain, and Italy.

At Versailles the nobility happily quarreled over an honors list of four thousand names while a secret committee went

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forward with plans for restoring the land of France to its ancient and obviously its proper owners.

As Marie was one of the first to point out, it was the king this and the king that . . . No one will ever know what the queen went through. Being a queen takes some doing, but you are never going to make a man understand this.

Consider, for a moment, that gigantic old dustbox Versailles. How could any human being keep it clean? The halls and staircases and chandeliers and corners and wainscoting seemed to draw dust. There had never been any plumbing worth mentioning inside the place, although there were millions of pipes to the fountains and the fish ponds outside.

Besides all this, there were the nobles in residence. Their bowings and scrapings and grand manners disgusted Marie. They were always deferring to her opinion and then not listening, particularly when she asked them—asked them nicely, mind you—please to turn out the lights when they left a room, please to pick up their dirty clothes, please to clean the bathtub after themselves. But it was worse than that. They ignored her requests that they stop breaking up the furniture to burn in the fireplaces, stop emptying their chamber pots in the garden. It was impossible for Marie to figure to herself how such people could live with themselves.

And would the king listen? King indeed! He had his head in the clouds even more than he had had when he played at being an astronomer.

Clotilde was no help to her. Clotilde was in love.

Worst of all, Marie had no one to talk to, to complain to, to gossip with.

Marie needed the sanctuary of another woman. Her good sense revolted against the ladies in waiting and the intolerable corps of nobles. Being queen, she was fearful of old friends of her Marigny days, because they could not fail to use their fancied influence in the interest of their husbands.

Queen Marie, casting in her mind, thought of her old friend and schoolmate Suzanne Lescault.

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Sister Hyacinthe was perfect as a companion to the queen. Her order was able to change a rule and to uncloister the nun upon recognition of certain advantages which might accrue to itself as well as the natural satisfaction of knowing that the dear queen was in good hands. Sister Hyacinthe was removed to Versailles and encelled in a lovely little room overlooking box hedges and a carp pool—a few steps, indeed, from the royal apartments.

It may never be known exactly how much Sister Hyacinthe contributed to the peace and security of France. For example:

"Suzanne, the king is being a bore about this mistress business. The Privy Council have appealed to me. Do you think you could talk to the king about it?"

"I have just the mistress for him," said Sister Hyacinthe. "Grand-niece of our Superior—quiet, well bred, a little stocky, but, Marie, she does beautiful needlework. She could be valuable to you."

"He won't consider her. He won't even discuss it."

"He won't have to see her," said Sister Hyacinthe. "In fact, it might be better if he didn't."

The queen never regretted calling in her old friend. And in the palace the wayward nobility began to be nervously aware of a force, of an iron influence which could be neither ignored nor sneered out of existence.

For her birthday, Marie presented Sister Hyacinthe with a daily foot massage by the best man in Paris. She ordered a tall screen with two holes near the bottom, through which Suzanne's feet and ankles could protrude.

"I don't know what I would do without her," said the queen.

"What?" the king asked.

Pippin was in a state of shock for a long time. He said to himself in wonder and in fear, "I am the king and I don't even know what a king is." He read the stories of his ancestors. "But they wanted to be kings," he told himself. "At least most

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of them did. And some of them wanted to be more. There I have it. If I could only find some sense of mission, of divinity, of purpose."

He visited his uncle again. "Am I right in thinking that you would be glad if you were not related to me?" he asked.

Uncle Charlie said, "I am your loyal subject."

"Well, suppose there were a revolt?"

"Do you want truth or loyalty?"

"I don't know—both, I guess."

Uncle Charlie said, "I will not hide from you that my position as your uncle has increased my business. I am doing very well, particularly with the tourists."

"Then your loyalty is tied to profit. Would you be disloyal if you suffered a loss?"

Uncle Charlie went behind a screen and brought out a bottle of cognac. "With water?" he asked.

"How good is the cognac?"

"I suggest water. . . . Now, can you tell me what is really troubling you?"

Pippin sipped his fine à l'eau. He said uncertainly, "The function of a king is to rule. To rule, one must have power. To have power one must take power . . ."

"Go on, child."

"The men who forced the crown on me were not intent on giving anything away."

"Ah! You learn, I see. You are becoming what is called cynical by those who fear reality. And you feel that you are a wheel unturning, a plant without a flower."

"Something like that. A king without power is a contradiction in terms, and a king with power is an abomination."

"Excuse me," said Uncle Charlie. "Mice are moving on the cheese." He went to the front of his shop. "Yes?" Pippin heard him say. "It is lovely. If I told you who I suspect painted it—No. I must say I do not know. Notice the brushwork here, see how the composition soars—and the subject, the costume—

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Oh! That? A nothing. Came in with a pile of trash from the cellar of a château. I haven't inspected it. I suppose you *could* buy it, but would it be wise? I would have to ask two hundred thousand francs because it would cost me that to have it cleaned and inspected. Consider again! Here, for example, is a Rouault about which there is no doubt . . ." There was a time of soft muttering, and then Uncle Charlie's voice. "Won't you let me dust it? I tell you I have not even inspected it."

In a few moments he came back, rubbing his hands.

"I'm ashamed of you," said the king.

Charles Martel went to a pile of dirty unframed canvases in a corner. "I must replace it," he said. "I do my best to discourage them. Perhaps I would feel worse if I did not know they thought they were cheating me." He carried the dusty painting to the front. "Ah, come in, Clotilde," he said. "Your father is here." He called, "It's Clotilde and the Egg Prince."

The three of them came past the red velvet drapery which hung over the doorway, and their passage left a thin cloud of dust in the air.

"Good evening, sir," said Tod. "He's teaching me the business. We're going to open galleries in Dallas and Cincinnati and one in Beverly Hills."

"Shame on him!" said the king.

"I try to discourage them but they demand—" Uncle Charlie began.

Tod laughed. "So if they were honest—"

"Exactly," said Uncle Charlie.

"Then why is the king against it?"

"He is sensitive."

Pippin said slowly, "I believe that all men are honest where they are disinterested. I believe that most people are vulnerable where they are interested. I believe that some men are honest in spite of interest. It seems to me reprehensible to search out areas of weakness and to exploit them."

"Aren't you going to have some difficulty being king, sir?"

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"He is already," Clotilde said bitterly. "He not only wants to be above everything, every human weakness, he wants his family to be too. He wants everybody to be good—and people just aren't good."

Pippin said, "Stop there, miss! I will not have you say that. People are good—just as long as they can be. Everybody wants to be good. That is why I resent it when goodness is made difficult or impossible for them."

Uncle Charlie said vindictively, "Before they came in, you were talking about power. You were saying, I believe, that a king without power is emasculate. If that is so, my dear nephew, what do you think of the proposition that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?"

The king said, "Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts, perhaps fear of a loss of power."

"But does not power create in other men the impulse which must cause fear in the holder of power? Can power exist without the ultimate fear that makes corruption? Can you have one without the other?"

"Oh, dear!" said Pippin. "I wish I knew."

"My poor child," said Uncle Charlie. "I did not mean to hurt you. Wait! I will get another bottle. This time you shall have it without water."

Tod watched the king sip his brandy and ruddy relaxation come over him. The tremble went out of his hands and lips and he loosened his muscles to the embrace of the velvet chairs.

"I'd like to talk to you about all this, sir," he said eagerly.

"I should be glad," said Pippin. "Will you come to Versailles?"

"I've been out there," said Tod. "It's crawling with free-loaders. Tell you what, sir. Why don't you come to my suite at the George Cinq?"

The king said, "One of the drawbacks of my office is that I can't go where I wish. The management would have to be told, the secret police, the newspapers privately informed. Your

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suite would be searched and the men placed on the roofs across the way. It's not very much fun to be royalty."

Tod said, "Not at the George Cinq. There hasn't been a Frenchman there in years. Besides, Ava Gardner and H. S. H. Kelly are in residence. You couldn't raise an eyebrow. It might be the most private place in France for a French king."

"Perhaps so," said Pippin. "I have even thought of disguises."

"My God," Uncle Charlie said, "you'd be so bad at it. You have absolutely no talent as an actor."

The queen drew her chair close to the chaise longue where Sister Hyacinthe sat in pious contemplation.

"I've always told you Pippin was vague," she said. "He was bad enough with his telescope, but he's worse now. He paces—with his hands behind his back—and he mutters. When I speak to him, he doesn't hear. And he is miserably unhappy. There's something on his mind. I wish you'd talk to him, Suzanne. You were always good with men—they say."

Marie steered her husband to Sister Hyacinthe's cell. "This is my old friend," she said, and then cleverly, "Oh! There's something I forgot. Excuse me for a moment." And she went out.

The king looked casually at the nun.

"Sit down, Sire."

"I haven't been very dutiful toward the Church. Since I was a child," he said.

"You might say I haven't either. I was twenty years on the musical stage. I went to school with Madame. You may have heard her speak of me as Mademoiselle Lescault. I don't think she will have mentioned my profession. Marie is one of those fortunate people who forbid existence to matters they do not approve of. I envy her this gift."

"My wife is remarkable in many ways, but not for subtlety. It is true that quite often I do not know what she is up to but I have never any doubt when she is up to something."

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Suzanne put her head back and closed her eyes. "You wonder why she brought you here and left you here?"

"I imagine that is what I wonder."

"She feels that you are uneasy, restless."

"I have often been uneasy and nearly always restless. This has not troubled her before. She attacked it with sauces and small delicious sweets."

"You are amiable, M'sieur. Could you tell me why you are uneasy now? Something I can twist around for Marie? She worries about you."

The king said, "I would help you if I could. Many of the causes I do not know myself. I did not ask to be king. I was picked like a berry from a bush and placed in a position where there are many precedents, nearly all of them bad and all of them unsuccessful."

Sister Hyacinthe said, "There have been kings who put the whole business in others' hands—the ministry, the council, the team—and went about enjoying themselves."

"I think, Sister, that was only after they had given up. There is a strong pressure on a king to be a king. The purpose of a king is to rule and the purpose of rule is to increase the well-being of the kingdom."

"It is a trap," said Sister Hyacinthe, "like all other virtue—it is a trap. Where virtue is involved it is very difficult to tell oneself the truth, M'sieur. There are two kinds of virtue. One is passionate ambition and the other simply a desire for the peace which comes from not giving anyone any trouble."

"You are thoughtful, Sister," said the king, and she knew from the brightness of his eyes that she had captured his attention.

"I have not been without this problem," she said. "When after twenty years of standing nude on a stage, inspiring dreams, I hope, in lonely men, I took the veil, it would have been very easy to assume a holy impulse—I could recite you all the ways of saying it. But I knew that I was simply tired."

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"You are honest."

"I don't know. Having admitted that my impulse was less than pure, I found in myself kindnesses, understandings, that even I can find no fault with—by-products of the initial laziness—I didn't even have to worry about virtue once I took the weight off my feet." She regarded him narrowly. "What is the best thing that ever happened to you, Sire?"

"Why—"

"If you can tell me, perhaps I can tell you what it is you are missing and mourning for."

"Why, I guess—I guess it was when the comet appeared in my reflector and I knew I was the first human ever to see it. I was—I was filled with wonder."

"They had no right to make you king," she said. "A king only repeats old mistakes, and if he knows this in advance—I understand now, Sire. A comet. Yes, I can see . . ."

"I like you, Sister," said the king. "Will you permit me to call on you now and then?"

"If I were sure your feeling was purely intellectual . . ."

"But Sister—"

"I should forbid it," said Sister Hyacinthe, and her laughter was reminiscent of the ladies' dressing room backstage. "You are a good man, Sire, and a good man draws women as cheese draws mice."

One of the great burdens on the king was his lack of privacy. He was followed, fawned on, protected, stared at. He had considered the use of disguises in the manner of Haroun-al-Raschid. At times he locked himself in his room simply to get away from the eyes and voices of the people who surrounded him.

At about this time he made a happy accidental discovery. The queen, finding it necessary to clean his office, sent him out until she could get it swept and dusted. He was wearing his corduroy jacket, a little frayed at the elbows, flannel trousers in need of a press, and espadrilles. He slipped some papers in a

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briefcase and went to the gardens to finish his work. As he sat on the coping of a fish pond, a gardener approached him.

"It is not permitted to sit here, M'sieur," said the gardener.

The king moved to a place in the shade on a great stairway. Immediately a gendarme touched his elbow.

"The visiting hours are from two to five, M'sieur. Please go to the entrance and await a guide."

Pippin gaped at him. He gathered up his papers and sauntered to the entrance. Then he boarded the tourist bus for Paris. His heart was light. To test himself thoroughly he strolled up the Champs Elysées and no one saw him.

He walked past Fouquet's and into the Avenue George V, past the Hotel Prince de Galles, and to the entrance of the Hotel George V itself.

Tod welcomed Pippin at the door to his apartment. "Well, I'll be damned," he said.

"Isn't it wonderful? I just walked in," said the king.

Tod said, "I have a friend who claims that, if you want to hide, get a job as a waiter in a good restaurant. No one ever looks at a waiter. Sit down, sir. Can I get you a drink?"

"A—how do you call it?—mar—mart?"

"Martini?"

"Exactly, a martini," said the king happily.

"Won't they be looking for you, sir?"

"I hope so," said the king. "But they won't look here. You said yourself that the French do not come here. . . . Now that, my friend, is a better one than my uncle makes."

"He can't bring himself to use enough ice," said Tod.

"One of my own guards ejected me from my own garden," said the king happily.

"I guess people see what they expect to see. They don't expect a bareheaded king with a bald spot. Take my father, now—"

Pippin broke in. "I wanted to talk to you about your father. It is true that at first he actually raised chickens?"

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"Sure he did, and he hates chickens."

"Is it not also true that many of the heads of your greatest corporations worked up from the bottom? I seem to remember . . ."

"Sure. Knudsen was an iron puddler; Ben Fairless worked on an open hearth, I think. I could name you lots—Charlie Wilson—oh, lots!"

"Then they know their business on all levels—"

"True," said Tod. "But don't think that makes them democratic. It's just the opposite."

"I've never understood America," said the king.

"Neither do we, sir. You might say we have two governments, kind of overlapping. First we have the elected government. It's Democratic or Republican, doesn't make much difference, and then there's corporation government."

"They get along together, these governments?"

"Sometimes," said Tod. "I don't understand it myself. You see, the elected government pretends to be democratic, and actually it is autocratic. The corporation governments pretend to be autocratic and they're all the time accusing the others of socialism. They hate socialism."

"So I have heard," said Pippin.

"Well, here's the funny thing, sir. You take a big corporation in America, say like General Motors or Du Pont or US Steel. The thing they're most afraid of is socialism, and at the same time they themselves are socialist states."

The king sat bolt upright. "Please?" he said.

"Well, just look at it, sir. They've got medical care for employees and their families and accident insurance and retirement pensions, paid vacations—even vacation places—and they're beginning to get guaranteed pay over the year. The employees have representation in pretty nearly everything, even the color they paint the factories. As a matter of fact, they've got socialism that makes the USSR look silly. Our corporations make the US Government seem like an absolute monarchy. Why, if the US Government tried to do one-tenth of what

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General Motors does, General Motors would go into armed revolt. It's what you might call a paradox, sir."

Pippin shook his head. He got up and went to the window and looked down on the tree-shaded Avenue George V. "Can you explain why they do these things?" he asked.

Tod Johnson poured gin by eye into the tall mixer, dashed a few drops of vermouth in, and stirred ice cubes round and round in the mixture.

"That is the oddest thing of all and the most reasonable," he said. "Do you like a squeeze of lemon peel, sir?"

"Yes, please. But why?"

"They don't do it out of kindness, sir. It's just that some of them have found out they can produce and sell more goods that way. They used to fight the employees. That's expensive. And sick workers are expensive. Do you think my father likes to feed his chickens vitamins and cod-liver oil and minerals and keep them warm and dry and happy? Hell, no! They lay more eggs that way. Oh, it wasn't quick and it's far from finished, but isn't it strange, sir, that out of the most autocratic system in the world the only really workable socialism seems to be growing? If my father heard me say that he'd string me up by the thumbs. He thinks *he* makes the decisions."

"And who does, Tod?"

"Circumstances and pressures," said Tod. "If he hadn't gone along with the pressures he wouldn't be in business." He drained the new martini gently into the glasses. "My father always says you've got to break everything down. What have you got to sell and who is going to buy it and have they got the money?"

"Sell?"

"Sure—now we sell eggs and pullets and supplies."

"What has a government to sell? It is a government."

"Sure, I know, but it has to sell something or you wouldn't need a government."

The king frowned. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Well, perhaps peace, order—perhaps progress, happiness."

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"That's quite a business," said Tod. "Now my father wants to know have you the capital and organization to do it?"

"I have the throne."

Tod said, "Seems to me the throne has some assets but it has some liabilities too. Take that bunch of freeloaders out at your place. You ought to get rid of them. They'll eat up the profit."

"Most of the nobility through misfortune—"

"Are broke," said Tod. "So let's put them out to pasture and get in a new crop."

"I don't understand."

"Look, King, I could sell titles in Texas and Beverly Hills for anything I want to ask. Why, I know people who would give the bottom dollar of a big stack for a patent of nobility. How about it? We can put out the word privately like a stock issue—dignified."

"I believe," said the king, "that you have laws forbidding your citizens to hold titles."

"Forget it," said Tod. "If those oil and cattle boys can rig the tax laws and the utilities laws, they aren't going to have any trouble with a little old law against titles. We could guarantee a knighthood for every congressman who voted in favor—but the big titles, that's where the money is."

"The whole thing smacks of my uncle," said the king.

"Well, I did discuss it with him. There's pots in it, King. I can arrange the whole thing."

"You have forgotten, my friend, that the purpose of a king is the well-being of his people—all of his people."

"I know," said Tod. "But it's like my father says. You've got to have capital and organization. The people who put you in didn't do it for nothing. Sooner or later you're going to have to fight them or join them."

"How about simple honesty—simple logic?"

"That has never worked," said Tod. "I hate to remind you of your own history. Louis the Fourteenth was a spendthrift. He busted the nation. He was at war all the time. He drained the

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treasury and wiped out a generation of young men. But he was the Sun King and he was adored, while France was flat on its pants.

"Then along came Louis the Sixteenth and he was simple and honest. He brought in efficiency experts. He called assemblies, he tried to listen, to understand. He tried everything and—" Tod drew his hand across his throat.

Pippin's head sank on his chest. He said sadly, "Why did they have to make me king?"

"I'm sorry," said Tod. "I guess I haven't helped much. But you get a thing like a throne in your hands and pretty soon you want to use it."

"I want peace—and my telescope."

"You'll want to use it," said Tod. "Everyone does. Look, I've been lousy to you. Let's you and me go out on the town and see how the other half lives."

"I must go back."

"But you may never break loose again. Besides, you owe it to your people to associate with them."

"Well, if you put it that way."

"I'll lend you some clothes," said Tod. "Nobody will ever recognize you."

At three-thirty in the morning, the Life Guard on duty at the gate of Versailles was alerted by a disturbance in front of the palace. In the half-darkness he was able to discern two men who clung solicitously together while they marched to the gate, singing:

"Allons, enfants de la Patrie

All the livelong day.

Le jour de gloire est arrivé

And the monkey wrapped his tail
around the flagpole.

Baa! Baa! Baa!"

The lieutenant's report read: "One of these men claimed to be Crown Prince of Petaluma while the other continued to mut-

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ter 'Baa! Baa! Baa!' I turned them over to the commandant of the palace for questioning."

The next evening, coming on duty, the lieutenant found that his report had been removed from the book and in its place was the notation: "Three hours and thirty minutes and all is well." And it was initialed by the commandant.



And meanwhile France enjoyed such peace and prosperity and profit that the newspapers began to refer to the time as the Platinum Age. A benevolent autumn slipped warmly over the country, moved up-Seine and then up-Loire, spread over the Dordogne, climbed the Jura, and lapped against the Alps. A great wheat crop had been harvested, and the grapes were warm and fat and happy. Even the truffles were benevolent—black and full, almost leaping out of the limestone earth. In

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the north the cows staggered cream-heavy in the pasturage, while the apple crop for once was ready and sufficient for the champagne the English love.

At no time in history had the tourists been so openhanded and humble nor their French hosts so happily sullen.

This being so, how does one explain the little cloud that peered over the horizon in mid-September, blackened and spread during the first weeks of October, towered like a thunderhead as November approached?

It is common to explain historic events after the fact in terms of the preoccupation of the historian. Thus the economist finds his pattern in economics, the politician in politics, the medical man in pollens or parasites. Very few if any historians have looked for causes simply in how people feel about things. Is it not true that in the United States the eras of greatest peace and prosperity have been also the periods of greatest uneasiness and discontent? Is it not also true that in these weeks of France's fruition there began to develop and grow among all classes a restlessness, a nervousness, a rustle of fear?

It is the tendency of human beings to distrust good fortune. In evil times we are too busy protecting ourselves. We are equipped for this. The one thing our species is helpless against is good fortune. It first puzzles, then frightens, then angers, and finally destroys us. Our basic conviction was put into words by a great and illiterate third baseman.

"Everything in life," he said, "is seven to five against."

The peasant, counting his profits, found time to wonder how much he had lost to the wholesaler. The retail merchant could be heard to curse under his breath when the wholesaler turned his back.

Suspicion of France was on the rise throughout the world. And in France there were gusts of nervousness. Luxembourg's addition of eight soldiers to its standing army caused a hurried meeting in the Quai d'Orsay.

In the provinces, people glanced nervously in the direction

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of Paris. In Paris it was whispered that the provinces were growing increasingly restless.

Armed robbery increased. Juvenile delinquency skyrocketed.

And while this cloud was rising and darkening—what of the king?

Uncle Charlie had been to Versailles once in his life when as a child in black smock and white collar he marched in a ragged line of smocked school children through halls and bed-chambers, ballrooms and cellars of that national monument, on order of the Minister of Public Instruction.

At that time Charles conceived a hatred and horror for the royal palace from which he never recovered. He remembered the cracked and painted paneling, the squeaking parquetry, the velvet ropes, the drafty halls, as a kind of nightmare.

It was, therefore, a surprise to the king when Uncle Charlie called on him in the royal apartments, and even a greater surprise that he was accompanied by Tod Johnson.

Charles gazed about the painted room. The floors screamed with shrunken pain when he moved. A blanket was tacked over the windows to keep the chill autumn winds out, and a log fire burned in the great fireplace. The gilt clocks sat on their marble tables and the stiff chairs stood against the wall as Charles remembered them.

Uncle Charlie said, "I must speak to you, my child."

Tod broke in. "I read in the Paris *Herald Tribune* that you had a mistress, sir. Art Buchwald said it."

"I have made some changes," the king said, "but in the matter of a mistress I had to compromise. The feeling was too strong. She is a nice little woman, I am told. Does her job well."

"You were told, sir? Haven't you seen her?"

"No," said the king, "I haven't. The queen insists that I ask her for an apéritif one day soon. Everyone says she is very nice; dresses well—neat, pleasant. It's just a form, but in this business forms are very important, particularly if one has plans."

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"Aha," said Uncle Charlie. "Plans. That's just what I was afraid of. That's why I came."

"What do you mean?" the king asked mildly.

"Listen, my child. Do you think your secret is a secret? All Paris, all France knows."

"Knows what?"

"My dear nephew, did you think a mechanic's jumper and a false mustache was a disguise? Do you think, when you applied for a job at Citroën and stood all day at the gates talking to the workmen, that you were actually incognito? And when you went through the old buildings on the Left Bank, pretending to be an inspector, tapping on walls, looking down drains—did you imagine that anyone thought you were an inspector?"

"I am amazed," said the king. "I had the cap, the badge."

"Pippin," demanded Uncle Charlie, "what are you up to? I warn you! People are growing nervous."

"I was trying to learn. There are so many things to be done."

"Stop!" cried Uncle Charlie. "Stop right there! You are playing with fire. Do you want barricades in the streets again? Do you wish Paris in flames? What makes you think you can reduce the numbers of the captains of police?"

"Nine out of ten of them do nothing," said the king.

"Oh, my child," said Uncle Charlie. "My poor bewildered child. You are not going to fall into the old trap, are you? Pippin, I order you to desist!"

The king sat down in a little chair and it became a throne.

"I did not ask to be king," he said, "but I am king and I find this dear, rich, productive France torn by selfish factions, fleeced by greedy promoters, deceived by parties. I find that there are six hundred ways of avoiding taxes if you are rich enough—sixty-five methods of raising rent in controlled rental areas. The riches of France, which should have some kind of distribution, are gobbled up. Everyone robs everyone, until a level is reached where there is nothing left to steal. No new houses are built and the old ones are falling to pieces. And on this favored land the maggots are feeding."

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"Pippin, stop it!"

"I am a king, Uncle Charlie. Please do not forget that. I know now why confusion in government is not only tolerated but encouraged. I have learned. A confused people can make no clear demands.

"Do you know what a French workman or peasant says when he refers to the government? He calls it 'them.' *They* are doing this. *They, they, they*. Something set apart, nameless, unidentifiable, and so unattackable. Anger dwindles down to grumbling. How can you force redress from something which does not exist?

"And consider the intellectuals, the dried-up minds. The writers in the past burned the name 'France' on the world. Do you know what they are doing now? They're sitting in huddled misery, building a philosophy of despair, while the painters, with few exceptions, paint apathy and jealous anarchy."

Uncle Charlie sat on the edge of one of the brocaded chairs and he rested his head in his cupped hands and he swayed from side to side like a mourner at a funeral.

Tod Johnson stood at the fireplace, warming his back. He asked quietly, "Have you got the capital and organization to change it?"

"He's got nothing," Uncle Charlie moaned. "Not one person. Not one sou."

"I have the Crown," said Pippin.

"They'll have you in the tumbril. Don't think the guillotine is beyond recall. You'll fail before you start. They'll destroy you."

"You use the word yourself," said Pippin. "*They, they, the* nameless *they*. It seems to me that even though the king may know he will fail, the king must try."

"Not so, my child. Not so. There have been many kings who simply sat back and—"

"I don't believe it," said the king. "I believe they tried, whatever was said of them. They must have tried; every one of them must have tried."

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"Come on, Tod," said Charles Martel. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I want to talk to Tod," said Pippin. "Good night, dear Uncle."

After Charles had gone, Tod asked, "Is it true what he said, sir? Have you been going around in disguises?"

"It was a mistake," said the king. "When I visited you no one saw me. The caps and mustaches and badges were a mistake."

"Why did you do it, sir?"

"I thought it might be a good idea to know something about France. Have you noticed a chill in the air?"

"Well, in a way. There's a lot of talk."

"I know," said the king. "I've heard it."

"There's one thing that makes me feel bad," said Tod. "My father—"

"He is ill?"

"You might call it that. He's got duke fever—of all the people in the world."

"Maybe there's a little of it in all of us, Tod."

"But you don't understand—my father—"

"Perhaps I do—a little," said the king.

As the autumnal days grew shorter, more and more private audiences were asked or even demanded of the king. Then he would sit behind his audience desk in a room that had been built and embellished for another king, while two or three representatives of faction or interest spoke to him privately. Each deputation was confident that the king was their partisan. They never came alone. The thought drifted through Pippin's mind that they did not trust one another. Every one of the representatives had the good of France at heart, but it was also true that the ultimate good of France rested on the primary good of faction—or even individual.

In this manner the king learned what was in store for France,

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what plans were being made. He sat silently and listened while Socialists proved that Communists must be outlawed, while Centrists showed beyond doubt that only if the financial backbone of France were bolstered and defended could prosperity trickle down to the lower orders.

Outwardly the king was calm and friendly. Now and then he nodded his head, which the audience took to mean the king's agreement and which was actually only the king's growing knowledge of government and of kingship.

Where the partisans left off the ambassadors continued. Sitting in his painted room, Pippin politely heard the neat and statesmanlike ambitions of other nations to use France, each for its own purpose—and again he nodded and gray depression fogged his soul.

On November 15 the various parties to be represented in the Constitutional Convention petitioned the crown to set the date for convening ahead to December 5. The king graciously agreed, and it was so ordered.

Chill mornings came, with heartening sunshine in the midday. The leaves fell from chestnuts and plane trees, and the street-sweepers' brooms were busy.

The king went back to his original disguise, which was himself. Dressed in his corduroy jacket and espadrilles, he took to riding a motor scooter about the country. After two falls he added a crash helmet to his costume.

One day he scooted to the little town of Gambais, famous for its perfect if partly ruined Château de Neuville. Pippin ate his lunch beside the overgrown moat of the château. He watched an elderly man feeling about in the reedy water of the moat with a long-tined rake.

The old man made contact with a hard and heavy object, and dragged it up the bank. It was a mossy bust of Pan, horned and garlanded. Only when the ancient struggled to lift Pan to a granite pedestal on the moat's edge did the king get up and

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move to help him. The two of them heaved the heavy statue up on its base, and then they stood back and regarded it, wiping their green and slippery fingers on their trousers.

"I like it facing a little more east," the old man said. The two of them edged it around. Pippin with his handkerchief wiped the crusted Panic face until the feral lips and the sly, lecherous eyes were visible.

"How did he get in the moat?" the king asked.

"Oh, someone pushed him in. They always do, sometimes two or three times a year."

"But why?"

The old man raised his shoulders and spread his hands. "Who knows?" he said. "There's people that push things in the moat. Pretty hard work too. There's just people that push things in the moat. See those other stands along there? There's a marble vase and a baby with a shell and a Leda in the water down there."

The king asked gently, "Are you the owner here?"

"No, I'm not. I live hereabouts."

"Then why do you pull them out?"

The old man looked puzzled—searched for an answer. "Why—I don't know. I guess there's people that pull things out—that's what they do. I guess I'm one of that kind."

The king stared at the green, slimy Pan.

The old man said helplessly, "I guess there's people that do different things, and," he added as though he had just discovered it, "I guess that's how things get done."

"Good or bad?" the king asked.

"I don't understand," said the old man helplessly. "There's just people—just what people do."

After returning from Gambais, the king went without announcement to call on Sister Hyacinthe, and he found her in the midst of her massage. All he could see of her were two pink feet and ankles protruding through the holes in the screen.

"He's almost finished, Sire," her voice said from behind the partition.

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The master bowed and went back to his work, making little mewing sounds of affection and respect over the pink toes, giving pats and squeezes of encouragement to her flattened arches.

When he was gone and the screen folded and put away, Sister Hyacinthe said, "Your color is high, Sire. You have been taking the sun?"

"I've been riding my scooter through the countryside, Sister."

She laughed. "I should like to see the Sun King doing it," she said. "Times are changed, I guess—a motor scooter, and I imagine your ministers are quarreling over the horsepower of their limousines."

"How did you know?" he asked.

"There are things one knows, Sire. For example, I know that you have a problem, that it is a grave problem, and that you have come to me for help in its solution."

Pippin said abruptly, "Sister, I am not allowed the time."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry."

"What shall I do?"

"I don't know what you should do, Sire, but I think I know what you will do."

"You know my dilemma?"

"Only the self-blinded could fail to see it. You will do what you do."

"That's what the old man said. But he was only pulling statues out of the mud. If I am in error, people will suffer—Marie, Clotilde, even France. What would you say, Sister, if a good deed set off an explosion?"

The nun said, "I should say that a good deed may be unwise, but it cannot be evil. It seems to me that the forward history of humans is based on good deeds that exploded—oh! and many were hurt or killed or impoverished, but some of the good remained."

In the early morning Pippin rode his motor scooter toward Gambais. In his pocket he had a bottle of wine.

He parked his scooter near the road and strolled through the

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overgrown park, smelling the hint of frost, picking the orange pips from the winter-ready wild-rose vines. A gust of wind dropped curling, darkened leaves from the restless trees on his head and shoulders.

Then he heard a weak shouting ahead of him near the moat and hurried forward until he cleared the edge of the forest and saw three burly youths laughing and wrestling playfully with the ancient. They had the bust of Pan in their arms and they moved toward the moat while the old man tugged helplessly at their jackets and shouted curses at them.

Pippin broke into a run, and then he was in the midst of it. The strong young men turned on the furious king, and then they were rolling and fighting and scratching on the ground, and then the squirming clot went over the edge and down into the dark water of the moat. And still the fight continued until the young men held the bleeding king under water. He ceased to struggle. Then in fear they clambered, dripping, up the slippery bank and ran, ran in panic and disappeared into the autumn forest.

Pippin gradually came back to consciousness. The ancient had pulled his head and chest out of the water.

"I'm all right, I guess," said the king.

"Don't look it! Them young thugs. I know 'em. I'll go to their people. I'll bring a charge. You come to my place and get dry and warmed up."

In a little shack hidden within the fringe of the forest his friend built up the fire and helped him to remove his clothes and bathed him with a sponge and a bucket of warm water, and dried him with frayed clean rags.

Pippin dug in the pocket of his spongy corduroy jacket for the bottle of wine.

"I brought you this as a present," he said.

The ancient drew the cork tenderly. He tasted and smacked his lips. "A wine like this—" he said helplessly. He wiped his lips with his sleeve for fear some extraneous flavor might creep in.

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Pippin said, "Last night I thought of something I wanted to ask you. What do you think of the king?"

"Which king?"

"The king—Pippin the Fourth, by the Grace of God Monarch of France."

"Oh! him. He's just the king, I guess. There's kings and then there's not kings, only—"

"Only what?"

"Well, there isn't rightly any kings any more. Kings? They're like those blasted big lizards, big as a house. They run out. They disappeared, they're ex—ex—"

"Extinct?"

"That's it, extinct. Seems like there wasn't room for them."

"But there is a King of France."

"He's like a play game for children," the old man said. "He's like Father Christmas. He's there, but when you get old enough you don't believe in him any more. He—well—he's just a dream, like."

"Do you think there will ever be any kings any more?"

"How should I know? What do you keep picking at me for? You'd think you was related to him." He surveyed the clothes hanging over the stove. "But you ain't."

"Would you know if there was a real king, not just a dream?"

"I guess so."

"How would you know?"

"Well, I guess there's only one way you'd know for sure. If they'd take him out and guillotine him I guess you'd be pretty sure he was a king. I guess you would."

Pippin got up and went to the stove and lifted down his damp and steaming clothes from the drying cords.

"They're not dry yet."

"I know—but I must go."

"You going to report me to somebody for something?"

"No," said the king. "You've answered my question. And—by God, I'll do it! A man can't stand being extinct. Perhaps I'll do it badly, but I'll do it."

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"What are you talking about? You haven't had that much wine."

Pippin pulled on his clammy clothes. "I'll send you some wine," he said. "I owe it to you."

"For what?"

"You have told me. To be guillotined a man must have done something to make him worthy of the guillotine. The guillotine or—or the Cross requires either a thief or—Thank you, my puller-out-of-things."

The king strode out of the shack and walked rapidly through the forest to the thicket by the roadside where his scooter was hidden.



On one point all ministers, delegates, nobles, and academicians were agreed. The opening of the convention must be regal. Too many of the recently honored had not yet been able to display publicly their robes and feathers, hats, medals, rosettes, and braid.

Pippin IV said acidly, "It was my impression and my hope, gentlemen, that this coming deliberation was for the purpose of

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devising a constitution, a body of laws dealing with ordinary things in the lives of ordinary people. Why is it necessary that we turn it into a costume party reminiscent of those given by South American millionaires in Venice? Why may we all not wear sober clothing of our own time?"

A Socialist and a nobleman fought for the floor and the Socialist won, no less a Socialist than Honnête Jean Veauvache, now Comte des Quatre Chats.

"Your Majesty," he said, "there is nothing ordinary about law. On the contrary, it is a mystical matter, in most minds closely related to religion. And, as the dispensers of holy law find vestments necessary, so do the servants of civil law. Remark, Sire, that our judges preside in gowns and caps. Think of English judges, who require themselves not only to sit in robes and wigs, regardless of the heat of the weather, but even to carry nosegays of flowers, once designed to cover the smell of the people, but not abandoned in a less odoriferous period. And in America, Sire, the most irascibly democratic of nations, even there, I am told, the ordinary people, feeling robbed, join secret organizations, where regularly they wear crowns and robes and ermine, and speak in rituals of antiquity which give them solemn solace even though they do not understand the words.

"Finally, Sire, the flower of France will be sitting and their ladies will be in the galleries. They have purchased new robes—even coronets. They are not to be denied the right to wear them. These may seem small things, but actually they are very large and very important. And if to this assembly should come the king, dressed in a two-button suit and a Sulka tie, carrying his papers in a briefcase, I shudder to think of the reaction. Indeed I feel that such a king would be laughed out of office."

The king had his pince-nez riding on his forefinger.

"My lords," he said, "I do not wish to be obstructive. Neither have I any desire to inhibit you in your new wardrobes and those of your wives, but at the coronation, in all that stuff, I felt a fool; moreover, I must have looked a fool."

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"Not so, Your Majesty," they chorused.

"Well, anyway, I was so hot I couldn't breathe."

Le Comte des Quatre Chats held up his hand again to be recognized.

"It would be sufficient, Sire, if you would appear in the uniform, say, of a Grand Marshal of France."

"But I have no such uniform."

"There are the museums, Sire. Surely Les Invalides can furnish a Grand Marshal's uniform."

The king was silent for a moment, and then he said, "If I agree to this, gentlemen, will you permit that I arrive from Versailles by automobile rather than by the state coach? You don't know how uncomfortable that coach can be."

After a whispered conference it was so agreed, but Honnête Jean said finally, "We, your loyal servants, Sire, would be pleased if during your address—only during—you would permit the purple robe of royalty to be dropped over your shoulders."

"Oh, Lord!" said Pippin. "All right, I'll agree, but only during the speech."

And it was so concluded.

On the afternoon of December 4, while the palace of Versailles was a madhouse of scurrying noblemen, trying on, shortening, lengthening, mending, and walking before mirrors in the robes of their station, the king in his corduroy jacket and crash helmet walked to the guard post at the gate, winked at the captain of the guard, with whom he had struck up a friendship, and passed into his hands a package of Lucky Strikes.

"This way, M'sieur," the captain said, and escorted the helmeted and goggled Pippin to the guards' house, where the motor scooter reposed under a tarpaulin.

The shutters of Charles Martel were closed and so was the door. Pippin banged on the door with his fist, and no response came from within. He moved aside and waited patiently until the door opened a crack, then placed his toe firmly in the opening.

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Uncle Charlie complained, "Can't a man have privacy even of a gallant nature?"

"I don't believe it," said the king.

"Oh! Come on in. What is it that you want?"

The king slipped into the darkened gallery and saw that the walls were bare and that large wooden boxes stood about, packed and ready to be nailed shut.

"You are running away, my Uncle?"

"I don't trust you," said Uncle Charlie. "I can put two and two together. You're up to something. And you will lose, my child. I don't see any reason why I also should lose because of your foolishness."

"I came for advice."

"Then I'll give it to you. Go and be a king in a proper way and stop sticking your nose into business and—and government, where it isn't wanted. That's my advice to you. If you would take it, I could unpack."

"You told me once that I was a patsy—a royal patsy. A patsy is a kind of pawn, is it not, something to be used as long as possible and then lost without grieving?"

"I suppose so. But when a pawn tries to do the work of government—then the pawn is a fool."

Pippin seated himself on a crate. "I know how you must feel, but I have thought deeply about this, my Uncle. A king is an anachronism—a king doesn't really exist."

"What do you propose?"

"Simply to make a few suggestions, based on my observations."

"They will guillotine you. They don't want suggestions."

"That is one thing I have learned. A king must be worthy of the guillotine. And maybe one or two of my suggestions might take root."

"I've always hated martyrs."

"I'm not a martyr, Uncle Charlie. A martyr trades something he has for something he wants. I am not ambitious."

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"What are you then—mischievous?"

"Perhaps. Or maybe only curious. And surely not brave."

"I used to think I knew you. How about Marie? How about Clotilde? Have you no feeling for them?"

"That is what I came to see you about, to ask you to look after them—that is, if an occasion should arise."

"You plan to do this thing tomorrow?"

"Yes. And I would be glad if you invited Madame and Clotilde to visit you tomorrow—perhaps you could take them on a little trip into the country. Perhaps the young Mr. Johnson might assist you. He has an automobile. A weekend on the Loire. There is a beautiful little inn at Sancerre. Will you do it?"

Uncle Charlie cursed filthily for several seconds.

"Then that is settled!" said Pippin. "Thank you, Uncle Charlie. I knew I could depend on you."

"Merde!" said Uncle Charlie.

Half a mile from the Palace of Versailles, Pippin turned his scooter off the road and into the forest. He pushed it over the deep carpet of fallen leaves far back from the highway. In the lee of an outcropping of stone he dogpaddled the fallen autumn leaves away, then put his scooter in the hollow, and covered it with leaves. He piled a few wind-fallen branches on top to hold the leaves in place. Then he walked out of the forest and continued on foot.

At dinner the queen said, "Your Uncle Charles has asked Clotilde and me to drive to Sancerre. I don't think this is a time—"

"Quite between us, my dear, I think it would be well to take Clotilde away from Paris for a few days. Just as a matter of policy, you know—she is talking too much to the newspapers. Sancerre, eh? I remember it as a lovely little town with a great wine if you can get any of it."

"I'll think about it," said the queen. "I have so much on my mind. I wonder, Pippin, whether I should tell you now—the

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agents absolutely refuse to terminate the lease at Number One Avenue de Marigny. They insist that a lease is a lease, no matter what the government."

"Perhaps we can sublet it later."

"Just one more thing to worry about," said the queen.

"You need a little holiday, my dear. You've had too many responsibilities."

The queen looked at him speculatively. "I don't like to leave you just at this time."

He took her hand and turned it palm upward and kissed it. "It's the perfect time," he said. "I'll be so busy with the convention, you would not even see me."

"Perhaps you're right," she said. "So much talk and politics buzzing around. I'm tired of the nobility, my dear. I'm bored with politics. Sometimes I wish we still lived in our little stable-house. That is a very pleasant neighborhood. But the concierge is impossible."

"I know," said the king, "but what can you expect of Alsations?"

"There you have it," said the queen. "Alsations—provincials, I say. Only interested in their tight little lives. Provincials!"

Everyone has seen photographs of the historic opening of the convention to deliberate the Code Pippin. Every newspaper and magazine in the world printed at least one version of it. The half-circle of rows of seats, filled with robed delegates, the speakers' rostrum and the high, thronelike chair of the Chief Minister, whose duty it was to control and govern the proceedings.

The meeting convened at three P.M. December 5, and it was agreed that after the address from the throne it should recess until the next day. The king was neither invited to nor wanted at the subsequent meetings. At the end he was expected to place his royal signature on the Code, preferably without reading it.

At 3:15 the Chief Minister raised the royal gavel, actually a wooden replica of the hammer from which Charles Martel took his name.

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The hammer crashed nobly down three times.

The halberdiers swung open the double doors—and Pippin entered.

By no stretch of imagination could he have been thought to have either a military figure or carriage. The marshal's uniform was a mistake. Moreover, the uniform—rented from a theatrical costumer—had at the last moment been discovered to be far too large. The tunic had been made to fit by a row of safety pins up the back. Nothing could be done about the crotch of the trousers, which, even though the waistband was high on his chest, still dangled halfway to his knees. The purple velvet cape with edging of ermine hung from his shoulders and was followed by two pages delegated to control it. They did their best, and when the king reached the rostrum and turned they brought the trailing ends of the train inward to try to conceal his pants, so that he arose out of its folds like the stamen of a lily.

Pippin read his speech exactly as though he was reading a speech. His voice had no rise and fall. His points were made with no underlining and no declamation.

No one could find any fault with the opening statement:

"My Lords, and my People—

"We, Pippin, King of France by right of blood and by further authority of election, do hold that this land has been singularly favored by God with richness of soil and geniality of climate, while its people are endowed with intelligence and talent above many others—"

At this point applause broke out, which caused him to look up, remove his pince-nez, and lose his place.

When the noise had subsided he replaced his pince-nez and bent over the tiny handwriting.

"We found," he said pedantically—"we found that the power, the products, the comforts, the profits, and the opportunities of our nation deserve a wider distribution than they now have."

Right and Left Centrists looked at one another in consternation.

"We believe that changes, programs, and some restrictions

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are necessary to the end that our people may live in comfort and peace and that the genius of the French, which once lighted the world, may be rekindled."

During the time it took to turn a page there was a little pattering of scattered handclapping. The delegates restlessly moved their feet among their books and briefcases.

Pippin continued.

"The People of France have created a king. It is not only the nature but the duty of a king to rule. Where a president may suggest, a king must order—otherwise his office is meaningless and his kingdom does not exist.

"We therefore order and decree that the Code you are creating shall contain the following. . . ."

And then the bomb exploded.

The first section dealt with taxes—to be kept as low as possible and to be collected from all.

The second, wages—to be keyed to profits and to move up and down with the cost of living.

Prices—to be strictly controlled against manipulation.

Housing—existing housing to be improved and new construction to be undertaken with supervision as to quality and rents.

The fifth section called for a reorganization of government to the end that it perform its functions with the least expenditure of money and personnel.

The sixth considered public health insurance and retirement pensions.

The seventh ordered the break-up of great land holdings to restore the wasted earth to productivity.

"To the great three words I want to add a fourth," he said, "so that henceforth the motto of the French shall be 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Opportunity.'"

The king, his head still down, waited for applause, and when none came he looked out over the thunderstruck gathering. The delegates were hypnotized with horror. They stared glassily back at the king. They seemed scarcely to breathe.

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Pippin IV had planned to bow at this point and to leave with dignity on the heels of his applause, but there was only aching silence. He took off his pince-nez and mounted it on his forefinger.

"I meant every word I said," he began uneasily. "I have really seen France, France which has survived three invasions, two occupations in three generations, and emerged whole and strong and free. I tell you what an enemy could not do to us we are doing to ourselves, like greedy, destructive children throwing cake at a birthday party."

And suddenly he was angry—coldly angry.

"I didn't ask to be king," he said hoarsely. "I begged not to be king. And you didn't want a king. You wanted a patsy."

Then he shouted, "But you elected a king, and by God you've got a king—or a gigantic joke."

Delegates cleared their throats, took off their glasses and polished them.

"I know as well as you do that the time for kings is past," he said quietly. "Royalty is extinct and its place is taken by boards of directors. What I have tried to do is to help you make the leap, for you are not one thing or the other. I am going to leave you now to your deliberations. You have my orders—but, whether you obey them or not, try to be worthy of our beautiful nation."

The king bowed slightly and turned to walk toward the door, but an open-mouthed page was standing on the edge of his purple and ermine-collared cape. It ripped from his shoulders and fell to the floor, exposing the row of safety pins up the back of his tunic, and the baggy crotch of the trousers flopping between his knees.

Strain in children and adults opens two avenues of relief—laughter or tears—and either is equally accessible. The safety pins did it.

Beginning with a snigger in the front benches, it spread to giggles, and then to hysteric laughter. Delegates pounded the

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backs of the delegates in front of them and honked and roared and wiped their eyes. Thus they channeled the shock the king's message had given them, the shock and the terror and their own deep sense of guilt.

Pippin could hear the laughter through the closed doors. He removed the baggy pants and hung them on a chair. He put on his dark blue suit with its pin stripe and tied his black silk knitted tie.

Quietly he went out a rear entrance. He walked in the streets a while, looked in windows. At a music store he bought a small cheap harmonica, and, concealing it in his hand, he blew a chord on it now and then. Then he bought a ticket on the Versailles bus and went home. He wandered about in the empty royal apartments.

He turned out the lights and pulled a chair to the leaded window overlooking the gardens. He took the harmonica from his pocket and tried it timidly. The palace was quiet. He played "Frère Jacques" slowly but accurately from beginning to end. The carp burped loudly in the fish ponds.

Meanwhile, telegraph and radio and transoceanic telephones staggered under the weight of traffic.

Dark-suited men sped to chancelleries. Private and secret wires went into action. The State Department in Washington froze French assets in the United States.

Luxembourg mobilized.

Paris was shuttered. Students from the Sorbonne swarmed up the Eiffel Tower and ripped down the royal standard and raised the Tricolor among the wind gauges.

Falaise in Normandy rounded up all strangers and guarded them.

Marseille rioted courteously and looted with discrimination. The Pope offered arbitration.

In Paris the gendarmes helped the rioters build barricades, using police hurdles.

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The warehouses up-Seine were broken open, and wine barrels rumbled over the cobbles.

The American Ambassador denounced revolution.

The Kremlin, China, the satellites, and Egypt telegraphed congratulations to the heroic People's Republic of France.

In the dark and quiet room at Versailles, Pippin tried to play the "Memphis Blues" and found he had no sharps and flats on his instrument. He moved on to "Home on the Range," which requires none, and was so intent on his work that he did not hear the soft knocking on the door.

Sister Hyacinthe opened the door, looked in, and saw the king silhouetted against the window. Her low laughter made him stop his playing and peer around at her.

"It is well to have a second trade," she said.

The king stood up awkwardly and knocked the moisture from the harmonica against the palm of his hand. "I didn't hear you, Sister."

"No. You were too busy, Sire."

He said a little stiffly, "One finds oneself doing silly things."

"Perhaps not silly, Sire. The mind seeks curious retreats. I did not know you were here. Nearly everyone else has gone. I understand there is an uproar in Paris. When they have exhausted the fun in Paris the rioters may come here. If you intend to go, I suggest that you go tonight."

"Without Marie—without Clotilde?"

"I don't think they are in as much danger as you, Sire."

He said, "If I escape or try to, I will be making myself important enough to kill. I've often wondered what would have happened if Louis the Sixteenth had not tried to escape—if he had walked alone and unguarded to the Jeu de Paume."

"You are brave, Sire."

"No, Sister, I am not brave. Perhaps I am stupid, but I am not brave. I do not want to be a sacrifice. I want my little house, my wife, and my telescope—nothing more. If they had not forced me to be king I would not have been forced to be king. It was a series of psychological accidents."

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"I wish I could be sure that you were safe. But I must go, M'sieur. Do you know that so-and-so has cured my feet? I may not forgive him for that. You will not come with me?"

"No, Sister."

"Give me your hand!"

Sister Hyacinthe bowed over his hand and kissed it. "Good-by—Your Majesty."

When he looked up she had gone, so silently that not even the parquetry had protested.

Pippin went down the circular staircase to the garden. His footsteps sounded loud on the gravel. He strolled around to the great entrance.

The night was chilly but brilliant with stars, and it was very quiet. No automobiles moved on the highways. Far away the lights of Paris were reflected in a glow against the sky. The great palace was dark behind him. He thought to himself that no night had been so still here for fifty years at least.

And then he heard the distant hum of a motor, then saw the lights of a speeding car. It screeched to a stop at the gates—a Buick convertible. The headlights blinded Pippin sitting against the kiosk.

Tod Johnson leaped out of the car and left the motor running. "Hurry up, sir. Get in."

Clotilde called from the car, "Hurry, Father!"

Pippin got slowly to his feet. "What is it you intend to do?"

"We're going to try to get across the Channel."

"Is it so bad, then?"

"You don't know, sir. Paris is a mess. You've been deposed, sir. They're yelling for the Republic. If I didn't have an American car we wouldn't have got through."

Pippin asked, "Where is Madame?"

"I don't know, sir. She was supposed to go with Uncle Charlie, but she disappeared."

"Do hurry, Father," said the subdued Clotilde. "You don't know what it's like."

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The king said, "Take care of her—as much as anyone can take care of anyone."

"Come along, sir."

"No," said Pippin. "I am not going. I think in a very little while they will forget me."

"They'll kill you, sir."

"I don't think so," said the king. "I really don't think so. And besides, I can't leave Marie. This is probably my last act as king. These are my orders. You will proceed to a Channel port. You will do your best to find a boat to take you and Clotilde to England. These are your orders, Tod. See that you carry them out."

"But—"

"You have your orders," said the king. "Grant me the final courtesy of obeying them."

He watched the Buick move away and then he strolled back to the palace to find his corduroy jacket and his crash helmet.

The motor scooter ran out of gasoline in the Bois de Boulogne, and Pippin left it leaning against a tree and continued on foot. It was dawn when he turned off the Champs Elysées into the Avenue de Marigny.

From out of the shadows a gendarme moved to intercept him. "You have your card of identity, M'sieur?"

Pippin brought out his wallet and handed over his card. The gendarme studied it and said, "Pippin Héristal. Why, I remember you, M'sieur. You live at Number One."

"That is correct," said Pippin.

"There's been looting," the gendarme observed. "I didn't recognize you in the helmet. Have you been on a trip, M'sieur?"

"Yes," said Pippin, "quite a long trip."

The gendarme saluted. "Everything seems quiet now," he said.

"Will you have a cigarette?"

"Thank you. Ah! a Lucky Strike."

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"Keep the package," said Pippin. He winked. "I've been out of the country."

The gendarme smiled. "I understand, M'sieur." And he put the package in his pocket under his cape.

Pippin had to ring the bell endlessly before the concierge shuffled bleary-eyed and ill-tempered to open the iron gate for him.

"A strange time to be coming in," he muttered.

Pippin said, "I will have to trouble you to open my door—my keys—"

"But Madame is in. You have only to ring. And what a turning out she's given it. Carry this, carry that. What a fury!"

Pippin said, "Good night, M'sieur."

He crossed the courtyard to the entrance of the stable-house. He took off his crash helmet and brushed back his hair with his fingers—and finally he laid his finger on the ivory button of the bell.

Blue Camellia

FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES was born in 1885 at the University of Virginia where her father was then head of the University's Greek department. She spent most of her childhood in Boston, studied at Geneva and Berlin, journeying extensively on the continent and in England. Mrs. Keyes' husband, Henry Wilder Keyes, was governor of New Hampshire and served three terms in the U. S. Senate. They have three sons. In 1919, Mrs. Keyes published her first novel and since that time she has had at least ten really big best sellers to her credit as well as essays, biography, and other non-fiction books.

BLUE CAMELLIA—Frances Parkinson
Keyes

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PROLOGUE

March 1886

The snow was pelting against the windowpanes, driven by a wicked wind; the storm was rapidly assuming the proportions of a blizzard. Mary Winslow replenished the kitchen stove, and then bent over the woodbox a second time, filling her arms with a supply for the airtight in the bedroom. As she straightened up again, she surveyed the woodbox with growing concern; it was already more than half empty and she would have to make another trip to the woodshed in the very near future. It was bitterly cold there, and the snow drifted in through the ill-patched roof and around the sills of the ill-fitting doors; it had done so, even in the morning, before the wind had risen; now it would be coming in great gusts. However, it was not the cold and the snow and the wind that caused her concern; she was strong and healthy and young, she could take the weather as it came. But Brent, her husband, whom she loved with all her heart and soul, had been critically ill with pneumonia; and though their doctor had told her that the sick man was practically out of danger now, he had added cautiously, "That is, if he doesn't catch cold again. You'll have to keep the house at an even temperature, or he may have a chill. And that could be disastrous, at this stage."

So far, Mary had kept Brent's room at an even temperature, but she did not know how much longer she could do so, especially in such weather. The woodshed had been chockablock in the autumn; but its contents were disappearing fast and this was only March. Even with a normal spring, there might well be two more months of cold weather. And nothing so far pointed to a normal spring. Besides, wood was hard to come by; she had

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supplemented their stock as well as she could with corncobs, but those did not go far or last long in such weather.

She pressed her lips together hard and shook her head as she stood looking down at the half-empty woodbox. But her head was high again, and she was smiling cheerfully when she went into the bedroom.

Brent returned her smile rather ruefully. "I hate to see you toting a great armful of wood like that, Mary. How you've stood it all this while, doing your work and mine, too, and nursing me at the same time. . . ."

"It's only what any woman would do, under the circumstances."

"Maybe you think so. I know better. And I know you're getting tuckered out. Or else you're worrying about something. What is it, Mary?"

Without replying, she opened the door of the airtight, raked the fire and began to put the wood in. When she closed the door, the fresh fuel was burning briskly. "Is it because I'm not getting well fast enough to suit you? Or because you think Lavinia's getting spoiled at her grandmother's? Or what?" Brent continued.

I suppose I'll have to tell him about the wood, Mary said to herself. I'd lie to him and say it was Lavinia I was worrying about, which of course it isn't—she isn't getting spoiled. She might be with my folks, but not with his. And he'd know right away I was lying, just as he knew I was worrying about something. If I could just keep him from worrying a few days longer—the doctor said in another week. . . .

"I wish you weren't so bound and determined to talk about this, that and the other thing," she said, "it's liable to start you coughing again. Why don't you let me read to you for a while? Carl Rivers brought the mail this morning, before the storm got so bad. There might be something in the paper. . . ."

She picked it up and glanced through the brief items of local and national news. None of them seemed likely to interest an invalid. Then her eyes fell on a startling announcement.

LAND BUYERS!

— From The —

NORTH.

WEST. ^a
n EAST.
d

SOUTH.

Will receive prompt attention by doing
their business with

W. W. DUSON & BRO.

RAYNE, LA.,

REAL ESTATE AND COLLECTION

AGENT.

I have many fine tracts of improved and unimproved lands in the parishes of St. Landry, Lafayette and Vermilion. All these lands

ARE THE RICHEST

in this section and will produce abundant yields.

All visitors coming to this region will be shown the surrounding country

FREE OF CHARGE

Underneath this announcement, which was set in boldface, was an article in smaller print. Mary read on with increasing absorption.

"I guess there *was* something in the paper," Brent remarked. "Mind letting me in on the news?"

"It isn't news, exactly. But—well, just listen to this!" She read aloud to him the headlines which had so amazed her. "It's funny, isn't it, that there should be an ad like that in one of our

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papers?" she said. "Louisiana—why, that must be nearly a thousand miles away! Whoever'd be interested, around here, in Louisiana land or house lots?"

"The man who put that ad in the paper must have thought someone would be. Ads cost money."

Brent made the remark as if stating a fact which was no concern of his. Mary was not sure whether he had found the piece in the paper tedious or whether he was getting tired. The wind had risen to a howl and the snow, driven against the windowpanes, was packed so high that the room was growing dark, though it was not yet four o'clock. Mary rose, lighted the kerosene lamp that stood at the farther end of the dresser.

"I guess I'd better light the lamp in the kitchen, too, and have a look at the barn," she said. "The storm's getting worse every minute."

Brent did not answer. He resented the fact that Mary was doing the outside chores. He was thankful that at least she had not been obliged to bother with the bees. They were hibernating, in their well-protected hives, in the angle between the henhouse and the barn.

"I guess I'd better be getting under way," Mary went on. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

"It's a long time since I've read anything myself. I've a notion I'd like to look at the paper for a while. You might hand it to me and set the lamp a little nearer."

Mary made the indicated arrangements for his well-being and bent over to kiss his forehead. He lifted his weak arms and held her tight for a moment while neither spoke. Then she went out to the kitchen and he could hear her moving about, stamping her feet into her rubber boots, taking the snow shovel from its corner. Then the kitchen door slammed behind her, and the only sounds came from the wind and the snow and the timbers of the house, creaking in the cold.

Brent picked up the paper, which Mary had put within easy reach, and turned to the piece which had caused her such aston-

ishment. Finally he laid the paper down beside him, but he did not stop thinking about what he had read.

It seemed a long time before he heard the kitchen door slam again. Mary called to him cheerfully: nothing was wrong in the barn; the reason she had not come back sooner was because the drifts were so bad; she had had to shovel and shovel. She would be in to fix his fire and bring him his broth right away.

"I suppose you'll have to fix the fire, or it'll go out. But couldn't the broth wait? I want to talk to you about something."

She realized that he was in earnest and did not make the mistake of insisting. When she had mended the two fires, she started to sit down in the rocker beside him. He held up a deterring hand.

"Just a minute, Mary. I want you should go into the parlor and see if you can find my old geography book—or yours."

"Have you any preference? I know just where to lay my hands on both."

"All right then, bring both. They might say something different."

"About what?"

"About Louisiana. How'd you like to go south, Mary?"

"How would . . . Brent, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about moving to Louisiana. I don't know about you, but I've had all I want to take of blizzards and pneumonia and working night and day just to make both ends meet. I've had enough of seeing *you* work night and day, getting more and more peaked and pale while you're doing it. As soon as I'm on my feet, I'm starting for Louisiana to have a look at some of the land advertised in this paper."

He picked up the paper, which was still lying beside him on the bed, and handed it to her.

"You said you wondered who'd be interested in an advertisement about Louisiana, way up here in Illinois," he said. "Well, I'll tell you: *I'm* interested. We've got a little in the savings bank, thanks to you, and when we've sold this place and the

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stock on it, we'll have more. I wouldn't even stop at borrowing something, for once, if I had to, though you know I don't hold with making a practice of getting into debt. And I hope you won't start saying this is our home, that we can't leave it just on a whim. It's *been* our home, but we won't be leaving it for a whim, we'll be leaving it for a better one. I'm just as sure as I'm lying here that we'll improve our lot and our child's lot by doing so."

He spoke with an earnestness that was rapidly mounting to vehemence. Mary stood staring at him in growing amazement while he talked, but she had not tried to interrupt him and now, as he paused for breath, she dropped on her knees beside his bed and took his hands in hers.

"I'm not going to start telling you anything," she said, "except that since you know what you want to do, I'll help, every way I can."

CHAPTER ONE

Life was sometimes puzzling to Lavinia Winslow, but it was never dull, and she could remember when it had begun to seem both more bewildering and more exciting. It was the spring after her father had been so sick, and she had made her grandmother and grandfather Winslow a long visit.

She did not enjoy visiting them as much as she enjoyed visiting her mother's parents, grandfather and grandmother Garland. Grandfather Garland raised horses and was in and out of the stables and pastures all the time that he was not out riding and driving and going to auctions and harness races. He took Lavinia with him wherever she wanted to go, which was everywhere he went; and he was a very jolly man, always laughing and joking about something.

Grandmother Garland did not laugh and joke as much as her husband, but it was plain to Lavinia that she enjoyed having him do so; her face, which was always smiling anyway, brightened still more whenever he came into the sunny room where she sat. She was a cripple, confined to a wheel chair, but apparently she did not mind this at all; she seemed very happy and she made everyone around her happy—her husband and her unmarried daughter Sally and her only grandchild, that is to say, Lavinia herself.

Lavinia's father was up and about now, but he tired very quickly and went to lie down in the middle of the morning and again in the middle of the afternoon, besides going to bed very early at night—so early that he did not even try to go to sleep, but instead lay and talked to Lavinia's mother. Lavinia was put to bed early herself and she was not always drowsy, either; so she could not help overhearing, through the open door between their rooms.

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"Of course, I won't do anything rash, Mary. I'll go down and have a look at the lay of the land before I start selling off here. I know what I want to do all right. All the same, I know I mustn't just shut my eyes and jump."

"That's the sensible way of looking at it, Brent. And of course you won't try to take a journey like that until you've got your strength back."

"Well, I don't know. Sometimes I think it might help to get my strength back if I could feel I'd made a start. But I'd hate to leave you with all the work to do while I was gone."

"You mustn't let that stop you. I didn't mind doing it before. And it'll be easier when the weather's warmer."

"As soon as the weather's warmer, we'll have to begin thinking about spring plowing and planting. You couldn't do that."

"I'm sure we could find someone who'd help."

"We didn't before. . . . Of course, we *could* try to sell right away—house, land, stock, everything—and you and Lavinia could go and stay with your folks while I was away."

Lavinia did not hear any more after that; either her parents lowered their voices, or she really was drowsy by that time; anyway, it did not seem to matter.

When the warm weather came, Brent Winslow went to Louisiana and Lavinia and her mother went to stay with grandfather and grandmother Garland. But their house was not sold yet; it was only loaned to a young man named Jonathan Fant, who had agreed to plow and plant and look after the stock while Father was gone, if he could have a job for the rest of the summer and a chance to buy the place, in case Father should decide they could have a better home in Louisiana than in Illinois.

Nobody seemed to know much about Jonathan Fant at first, and grandmother Winslow did not hesitate to refer to him openly as a tramp and to hint, less openly, that he might be an escaped convict. He simply came to the house one day on foot and rang the front doorbell. Unless he had some kind of a criminal past, an obviously educated man would not be going

from house to house, asking if anyone needed a hired man, grandmother Winslow asserted.

Brent Winslow was not present when his mother stormed away in this vein at his wife, but Lavinia was, and she watched closely and listened carefully while Mary answered in her mild way. Jonathan Fant had not told them much about himself, she admitted freely; but after all, there had not been much time yet. He had started right in, the morning after his arrival, helping with the chores. If he did not volunteer more information about himself within the next few days, and they all continued to like him and Brent continued to be satisfied with his work, Brent would ask him a few questions; but they were going to wait and see if he did not tell them more of his own accord.

After she had said this, she rose quietly and told Lavinia they must be going home; it was time to get Father's supper and, though she left without any appearance of haste, it was impossible for grandmother Winslow to argue with her.

When the same story about Jonathan Fant's appearance had been told grandmother Garland, the pleasant old lady was inclined to agree with her daughter. "Of course, you shouldn't make decisions hastily," she said, "except when you find you can make them instinctively. Perhaps this is one of those times." Then grandmother Garland suggested that they should all come over to dinner on Sunday.

Lavinia thought there had never been a pleasanter gathering. Dinner was very good, all sorts of fixin's to go with the baked chicken, and ice cream as well as pie for dessert. Sally had got out the best tablecloth and the best china, so everything looked as nice as it tasted. But that was not the only reason the occasion was such a success. Jonathan Fant made it a success. It turned out that he knew a lot about horses and he talked with grandfather Garland about them. He also knew a lot about the Bible and he talked with grandmother Garland about that. It turned out that his mother had come from a place, also in Louisiana, called St. Martinville, and that she had met his

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father, who came from Charleston, at a party in New Orleans, where she was visiting relatives and he had gone on business. It had been a case of love at first sight.

"Such things do happen sometimes, you know," he said gaily, addressing the company at large. And then he had looked across the table at Sally, who had blushed deeply and sprung up, saying she must go and get some more ice cream, and Jonathan Fant had sprung up, too, saying he would help her.

They were gone quite a few minutes, and after they came back to the dining room, and everyone had more ice cream, nobody said anything about getting up and clearing the table or doing the dishes. While they sat there peacefully, Jonathan Fant told them all more and more about himself. His grandfather and grandmother Arcenau were still living; they kept urging him to come to St. Martinville and make his home with them, but nothing would induce him to. The Arcenau were very old now and lived entirely in the past. They hardly ever even went out on the gallery, much less in the yard any more, though the yard was pretty, even if it was small. The only time his grandmother Arcenau bothered to pick flowers was when she wanted to put them on the family tomb. She still did go regularly to the cemetery. . . .

"What kind of flowers does she have in her yard?" Mary interrupted to ask.

"Why, all kinds! Paper-white narcissi in January, day lilies and iris in the spring, chrysanthemums for All Saints', camellias from October to April, roses all the year round—"

"Roses all the year round! Camellias from October to April!" Mary echoed unbelievably. "What kind of camellias does she have? What colors?"

"Why, all kinds—Alba Plena, dead white; Governor Mouton, named for a neighbor of ours, red and white; Colette, that another neighbor brought home from France, red and white, too, but darker than the Governor Mouton; Colonial Lady, variegated. There are almost all colors—except blue, of course."

"Mary's crazy about flowers," Sally broke in. "To hear her

talk, you'd think she'd rather have camellias than diamonds—not that she's ever seen one. She'd probably be disappointed if she did—unless it was blue.”

“No I wouldn't. I've read about them and I know they're simply beautiful.”

“You interrupted Mr. Fant, Mary. The rest of us were interested in everything he was saying, not just the part about the flowers.”

There really wasn't much more to say about the Arcenaux, Jonathan Fant went on. When they did talk, it was about life “before the war”; the war had been over more than twenty years now, but they still talked as if Grant and Lee had met at Appomattox Courthouse just the day before yesterday. It was the same in South Carolina. Not that he was surprised because Carolinians—or Louisianians, either, for that matter—found the war hard to forget. His father's people had gone through even more than his mother's people—their plantation had been destroyed and nearly every male member of the family had been killed. He had been brought up in Charleston by a great-uncle and great-aunt who had not lost quite as much as the rest of the family, though they had had to scrimp and save, too. By scrimping and saving, they had managed to send him to the University of Virginia—that was where all the Fants had gone, in better days. He supposed he could have stayed on in Virginia, but again it was a question of land and he didn't own any there.

“But how did you happen to choose Monroe?” Lavinia burst out.

“Well, you see—” he began. Then he glanced at grandmother Garland. She answered for him.

“I've been corresponding with Mme Arcenaux of St. Martinville, Louisiana, over the years,” she said quietly. “Her daughter Arthemise—Mr. Fant's mother—and I met at Saratoga Springs, when we were both brides—it was a great place for honeymooners from both North and South in those days. We never met afterward; but we wrote each other frequently, until Arthe-

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mise died. After Brent began to ask questions about Louisiana and to talk about going there, I naturally tried to think what I might do to help," she went on, "and I remembered Mme Arcenaux. She wrote back right away, saying she was delighted to hear from me, and there was a special reason for that, too: her only grandson Jonathan Fant was visiting her and he was very restless. He didn't want to stay in the South and he felt he'd like to have a look at the Middle West. To make a long story a little shorter, here Jonathan is and I'm sure I'm speaking for everyone when I say that he's very, very welcome!"

She looked around the table, smiling at them all. There was a moment of startled silence. Then Jonathan Fant shifted his gaze again, this time toward Brent Winslow.

"The Old South is dead," he said.

"May be," Brent answered evenly. "But the New South isn't. I'm as sure of that as you are of the other."

Nothing very exciting happened while Brent was gone. He did not write often and, when he did, the letters began "Dear Folks," and ended "Aff.," and were rather impersonal. He failed to say much about what he was doing and seeing. "Train trip pretty tiring, but New Orleans worth it. Never expected to like a city, but this one is different. Will tell you more about it when I get home." . . . "Climate everything I hoped for and more. I don't see why almost anything shouldn't grow here. Have stayed overnight at St. Martinville with the Arcenaux, who were very kind; but they live entirely in the tragic past, like Jonathan told us; and, as I told *him*, I'm looking to the future. So I got more out of staying at the Plaquemine Brulee—now called Church Point—with the Daigles, who keep a store and are Cajuns, that is part Canadian, part Indian by descent; at the 'Cove' near Rayne with the Gossens, who homesteaded there when things were really rough and who have now built a lake for irrigation and are raising rice; and with Mr. Jean Castex, a French carpenter in Mermentau—quite a variety!

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They are all prospering, so I don't see why I can't, too. The prairie isn't barren, it's just uncultivated."

Lavinia was very contented with grandfather and grandmother Garland. Two or three times a week she went with her mother and Sally when they drove over to "straighten things out" for Jonathan Fant.

He handled the stock well, and it was plain that he not only loved the land; he knew what to do with it. He plowed and planted more of it than Brent had ever done and talked about further development of the pastures. He also doubled the little flower garden in size, adding many new varieties. He said he was sorry he could not add camellias, especially blue camellias, as that really would have made a difference. But that was just one of the jokes that went with his crinkly smile; he had wrought a great change and he and everyone else knew this. However, the greatest difference was in the house. He asked Mary if she would mind if he moved some of his books into the parlor, and when she said no, except that there was only that one small bookcase, he answered that he could build some additional ones very easily. He did this, putting them all around the room, and filling them with more books than Lavinia had ever seen in her life; they came in big boxes, by express, from Charleston. Then he said he had a few family pictures he would like to put around, too, if no one had any objections. The parlor did not look like the same room when he had installed these belongings, and he kept it open all the time. He sat there and read every evening, when he was not over at the Garlands' house, and sometimes he played the piano. Lavinia had never heard a man play the piano before, but Jonathan Fant played all kinds of music. He said he thought he could teach her, too, if she would like to learn, and she said she would, very much.

Brent walked in on them, entirely without notice, just as they were sitting down to supper one stifling hot evening in August. They sprang up from the table with one accord except, of course, for grandmother Garland, who had to sit quietly in

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her wheel chair. But it was easy to see, from the look on her face, that she was almost as happy to have him home again as Mary, who threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, over and over again, in front of everyone, and as Lavinia, who jumped up and down with glee.

"My train was late; I was afraid you'd be finished and that I'd have to go hungry," he remarked at last, glancing around the laden table. "But it looks as if there were still something left for the tired traveler."

"We don't have supper as early as we used to, because of Mr. Fant's bath," Lavinia informed him, pleased to be in a position to explain.

"Well, I sure am glad he took one tonight," Brent laughed and helped himself to the beef stew. Sally had hastened to set an extra place, and Mary was busily filling a cup with coffee.

"Now that your father's home again, he'll be the one to decide what time to leave the fields," Jonathan Fant reminded Lavinia. "I've been staying out as long as I could see to work. That makes a difference, you know."

He said it in his usual pleasant way, yet it seemed to Lavinia he was suggesting that her father might like to knock off work earlier than he did and this did not seem to her quite fair. She wanted to explain, but so many grown-up people wanted to talk to her father and there were so many things he wanted to say himself that she didn't have a chance.

It was so late before they finished supper that, without much discussion it was decided Brent should spend the night at the Garlands'. After Brent and Mary went to bed, Lavinia, who was occupying a trundle in the same room, realized that Jonathan Fant was again the topic of conversation.

"I didn't like to say this at supper, Mary. But I didn't know where I'd find you, and I stopped by our house first on my way from the depot. I'd hardly have known it."

"Yes, Jonathan has made a good many improvements."

"I suppose they are improvements. But it doesn't seem like

my house—of course, I mean our house—any more. Why, the parlor—”

“But don’t you think it’s pleasant that way, darling, and— and livable? We never had much use out of the parlor before. Now it’s used all the time. And all those books and pictures and then the piano. . . . Do you know, Brent, I think Lavinia’s got quite a good deal of musical talent. Jonathan’s giving her lessons. If we go to Louisiana will there be anyone who can give her music lessons?”

“If we go to Louisiana! Why, it was all settled, before I went away, that we were going! My trip was just to look over the lay of the land.”

“Yes, I know. But since then—”

“You told me you’d be glad to go. You said that whatever I wanted was what you wanted, too. You don’t mean to tell me that you’ve been influenced by this tramp, so that you’ve changed your mind?”

“He’s not a tramp! He’s the son of one of Mother’s oldest friends! He’s a kind, cultured gentleman!”

“Mary, I don’t like the way you’re talking.”

“I can’t help it. I think you’re being very unfair. The changes Jonathan made *are* improvements. And I’m sure Sally and Jonathan are in love.”

“What!”

“It was love at first sight. Jonathan said so himself.”

“Well, of course if that’s the way things are. . . .” Brent did not finish the sentence, and when he went on, the anger was gone from his voice. “How could Sally leave your mother?” he asked thoughtfully.

“She couldn’t. They’d live right here, for the present.”

“And our house would be empty?”

“I suppose so, for the present anyway. Jonathan could go back and forth between the two places—after all, it’s what he’s been doing while you’ve been gone. Jonathan could stay here and help Father with the horses. He knows a lot about horses.

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Father would be glad to have him. He thinks a good deal of Jonathan."

"Well, of course if that's the way things are—" Brent said again and left his sentence unfinished. It was Mary who went back to what he had said before.

"You know it wasn't I who suggested leaving our home, Brent. It was you. And you didn't seem to mind. You said we'd have a better one. I thought you didn't care what happened to that one. I didn't think you'd mind if it were changed or empty."

"No, I don't mind," Brent said slowly. "That is, I don't mind much. But I think maybe the sooner we get started for Louisiana. . . ."

They did not get started right away, however. It was easy to see that Brent was itching to be off; but he agreed it was only fair he should stay in Illinois until the crops were all in, since Jonathan Fant had worked so hard to do well with them. It turned out to be quite true that Sally was planning to marry Jonathan, and Brent realized that she would want to have her sister present at the wedding, besides really needing her sister's help to get ready for it, especially as grandmother Garland was getting frailer and frailer all the time. She had never been one to refer to her condition if she could help it, but finally she spoke to Brent about it.

"I do hope I'm going to live to see Jonathan and Sally safely married, Brent. I think he'll make her a good, faithful husband. But he's been a rover for a long time. It's hard to change the habits of years. He's talking now about returning to South Carolina before the wedding. It seems there are some matters there he wants to wind up."

"That sounds reasonable. But why doesn't he marry Sally first and take her along? It would make a fine wedding trip for her."

"I thought of that myself, Brent, but there are lots of things a woman thinks of that she's wiser not to mention. Sally, I'm sorry to say, *did* suggest it and Jonathan didn't think well of

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the suggestion. He says he'd rather be married after Christmas."

"*After Christmas!* Why then I couldn't get started back to Louisiana until sometime next year!"

"Well, early next year. Would you mind waiting that long?"

"Yes, I would. Once I've decided on a move, I want to make it."

He did not change his mind about this, but Jonathan Fant did not change his mind, either. As soon as the crops were in, he left for South Carolina.

He wrote very nice letters, not only to Sally but also to grandfather and grandmother Garland and to Lavinia herself. He likewise sent them all very nice Christmas presents; but he still did not say just when he was coming back. And, early in January, grandmother Garland died in her sleep, so quietly that not even her husband knew she was dead until morning.

They wired Jonathan Fant and he arrived in time for the funeral. He was kind and helpful and sympathetic with everyone. At the services, he sat with the family, beside Lavinia; he held her hand and every now and then he unobtrusively gave her a clean handkerchief. And in that awful, vacant period, after they had returned from the cemetery and the house was in order again and there was nothing to do and everyone was wishing that there were, he went into the parlor and played soft, beautiful music that gradually brought solace.

There was only one thing he did not do which all of them, consciously or unconsciously, were waiting for him to do: he did not say anything more about marrying Sally.

It was Mary who finally spoke to him on the subject. She was at the Garlands' house a great deal, going through her mother's belongings.

The day that Mary spoke to Jonathan she did not notice that Lavinia had come into the room where she was working. She was sitting at a desk, very busy with the contents of its pigeonholes and, though she did see Jonathan, that was because he came and stood so close beside her.

"Will it bother you if I sit down for a few minutes?" he asked.

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"No. I'm at a good stopping place and I've been wanting to talk to you anyway."

"That's good. Because I've been wanting to talk to you."

"Shall I begin or will you?"

"I'd rather you began. It might help with what I have to say."

"All right. It's this, Jonathan. I know you've hesitated to— to do much love-making, so soon after Mother's death. I know you've been careful to show respect to her memory and to consider our feelings—Sally's feelings. But I honestly believe it would be a comfort to her if—"

"I have infinite respect for your mother's memory. But it wasn't on that account I've refrained from making love to Sally. It wasn't on account of Sally's feelings, either. It was on account of my own."

"But this loss can't be such a deep personal grief for you as it is for the rest of us."

"No. I wasn't referring to a deep personal grief. I was referring to an entirely different kind of feeling."

"I don't know what you mean, Jonathan."

"Don't you, Mary?"

"No. If I did, I wouldn't ask you."

"And you are asking me?"

"Yes."

"All right then. Remember I didn't tell you until you did. I'm not in love with Sally. I'm in love with you."

Mary sprang up, scattering the papers she still had on her lap as she did so.

"How dare you—" she began. But she could not say any more, for Jonathan took hold of her shoulders and pressed down on them, not roughly, but hard enough to force her back into her chair. Then he continued to stand over her, preventing her escape.

"Remember I didn't tell you until you asked me to," he repeated compellingly. "So don't ask me how I dare. I was attracted to Sally, superficially, when I first saw her. She's a very

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pretty girl. I didn't dream she'd take my casual compliments seriously or that anyone else would. I didn't realize her complete lack of sophistication. And evidently I underestimated my own powers of attraction—for her. At all events, the first thing that I knew she was assuming that we were engaged."

"Assuming!"

"Yes. That's what I said and that's what I meant—assuming. I never asked her, in so many words, to marry me."

"Perhaps not in so many words. But you must have given her to understand—"

"She *misunderstood*. I don't think your mother did. I think she guessed I wasn't anywhere nearly as much in love with Sally as Sally was with me. I think your mother knew I left because I didn't feel too sure then whether or not I could go through with this marriage. I think she wasn't certain I was coming back—until just before the end. Then I wrote her that I *was* coming back. You'll probably find the letter before long. I think it comforted her, that she died happier because of it. I think she'd been worrying about Sally before she got it—about Sally's hurt pride at being jilted."

"A lot more than hurt pride is involved and you know it."

"Oh, yes, I know it. I'm ready now to go through with this marriage, but I'm not ready to go through with it under false pretenses. I want Sally to come to her senses first. I want her to admit that, though I'm proposing marriage now, I never did before, and I want it understood that I'm not being cajoled or coerced into this by her tears. I think Sally's an attractive girl and I think she'll make a good wife. I'll do my best to be a good husband and make our marriage a success. But if it fails, I don't want you to tell me afterward that this was all my fault. Because, no matter how hard I try, it probably won't be as much of a success as it would have been if I'd fallen in love with Sally instead of you."

It was getting dark when Mary and Lavinia started home.

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Lavinia thought that her mother was crying, but she was not sure, because she could not see very well in the dim light; besides, Mary was walking very rapidly.

By the time Mary and Lavinia reached home, Brent had finished his chores and was sitting at the kitchen table reading his paper. When Mary opened the door, he jumped up and rushed toward her and Lavinia, waving his paper excitedly.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. And then, before either of the others could say a word, he began to read:

"CROWLEY, LA.—LANDS! LANDS AND LOTS FOR SALE. AUCTION SALE WILL TAKE PLACE FEB. 10, 1887—OF TOWN LOTS IN CROWLEY, AND 150,000 ACRES OF GOOD LANDS SITUATED IN ACADIA, ST. LANDRY, LAFAYETTE AND CALCASIEU PARISHES. SOUTHWESTERN LOUISIANA LAND COMPANY, OPELOUSAS, LA. OR W. W. DUSON, GENERAL MANAGER, RAYNE, ACADIA PARISH, LA."

He flung the paper down on the table and looked at his wife.

"I know that's less than two weeks off," he said excitedly. "But I've got to go. This is my big chance—*our* big chance. Don't tell me you can't get ready to go, too. You've *got* to get ready. This time, you and Lavinia have got to come with me."

"Yes, Brent, I know we have," Mary answered.

CHAPTER TWO

It was terribly crowded on the excursion train. It had been bitterly cold when the excursionists from Chicago and St. Louis had left home; now the weather was balmy. When the windows were opened, clouds of cinders blew in; when the windows were closed, the atmosphere was stifling.

If they had only been able to believe that the end was in sight, the midwestern excursionists would not have found the journey so unbearable. They had boasted, at the beginning, that they were pioneers, that of course they expected privations and hardships; but somehow they had all visualized these as arising in connection with the new homes they would establish, and not with the process of reaching them. They had overlooked the crowding, the confusion, the disorder, the dirt that would precede their arrival.

When the whistle of the engine first began to blow, they took little notice of it, because there was so much noise in the car already; but as the blowing became more and more insistent, the men grew curious and some of the women alarmed. Brent caught hold of a brakeman who was hurrying through the car and detained him almost forcibly.

"What's the matter? Are we in danger?"

"No, we ain't, but must be some damfool cow is. The engineer's trying to frighten her off the track, but she just keeps runnin' along in front of the train. Looks like we might have to stop, so I can get out and chase her away."

"Stop! But we're running late already!" The first protest came in a chorus. It was quickly renewed in various forms from various directions. "We were promised we'd get there in time for the auction!" . . . "Three o'clock sharp it begins, and if I know anything about that man Duson, when he says three

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o'clock that's what he means." . . . "Well, even if we don't stop, we'll never get there on time if we have to chase a cow all the way from here to Crowley. Can't the engineer slow down, without stopping, just for a minute? Then you could get off in front, drive her away and swing back on again at the rear."

The last was in the form of an appeal to the harassed brakeman. He nodded and broke away. "I'll talk to the engineer and see what we can do."

The heavy door banged after him. Even the shouting children were momentarily quiet, as the train began to slow down, and the sounds of escaping steam and a ringing bell echoed through the car, mingling with the persistent whistle and a new noise—the indignant mooing of an outraged brindle cow. The children crowded to the windows in time to see her heading toward the surrounding prairie land, her tail and hind legs still registering protest. Then the bell ringing and the whistling stopped, and the train slowly began to gather momentum again.

The incident of the refractory cow, instead of adding to the general gloom, somehow relieved it. While they were still discussing it, the train slackened speed, there was the sound of escaping steam, this time to the accompaniment of screeching brakes. Then the brakeman flung open one door and the conductor the other, simultaneously shouting, "Crowley! Crowley!"

Brent was well to the forefront of the crowd, with Mary and Lavinia beside him; But Lavinia suddenly remembered that, in her haste, she had left her doll behind. Mary, unwilling to be parted from her, went back, too. By the time they caught up with Brent, nearly all their traveling companions were on the platform of the depot, where a babel of voices rose above the mingled sounds of creaking vehicles.

"Take your bags, sir? Hack right here! This way to the Crowley House! Only hotel in town, so far. Watch out for that mud, ma'am. Liable to go down deep, once you step off the platform."

There had been a general rush toward the first hack and as

many as possible of those who had missed it now elbowed their way along and piled into the second one.

"I guess we will have to walk," Brent said, turning to Mary. "There's only that one wagon, on the other side of the road, and evidently it isn't a public conveyance—anyway, there isn't anyone in it. You don't mind going to the Crowley House on foot, do you?"

"Of course not. We'll be able to see things better, walking."

Mary was carrying a bag herself and Lavinia was clinging to her free hand. But, in spite of her weariness, her voice sounded eager and cheerful. Suddenly he caught hold of her and jerked her back. The horse hitched to the wagon across the street had begun to rear and neigh; men were yelling, women screaming.

"Look out for that horse!" "Runaway horse! Clear the street!"

"He sho' can't run fast, no, nor neither far in this gumbo mud," a man, standing near the Winslows, with his arm around the shoulders of a stocky, shockheaded boy, remarked dryly.

"No, no. He'll be under control in a minute." Another man, who had just come toward them, spoke with a complete calm that was contagious. After a swift glance at the Winslows, he came closer still. "Good evening, folks," he said genially. "Glad to see you. Sorry I couldn't reach this side of the platform sooner, but there was a jam the first few minutes after the train got in. I overheard you say you thought perhaps you'd better walk. Don't think of it. We have to keep sending vehicles back and forth, because there's still such a scarcity, but there'll be only a short delay, I assure you. . . . Let me introduce myself. Duson's the name—W. W. Duson." He held out his hand and looked at Brent more closely still. "We've met before, haven't we?"

"Yes," said Brent, taking the proffered hand. "I was here last spring for a while, just looking around, and I saw you then. Winslow's the name—Brent Winslow."

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"Of course, of course! Glad to welcome you back. And now you've brought your family with you?"

"Yes. This is my wife," Brent said, turning toward Mary. "And our little daughter Lavinia."

"How are you, madam?" Mr. Duson inquired. "How are you, Lavinia? This is going to be an experience you'll never forget. Not many people have the chance to be in at the birth of a town."

"That's true, they don't," remarked the man who had said that no horse could run far or fast in such mud, and who now volunteered the information that his name was Ursin Villac, and the further information that the stocky, shockheaded boy accompanying him was his son Claude. He had a decided accent, and Brent concluded that he must be a Cajun. The shockheaded boy, who had been solemnly and silently staring at Lavinia, now grinned and, with a mumbled greeting, held out a stick of candy. Lavinia smiled back and accepted the offering with appreciation. All in all, Duson's good will, like his calmness, was apparently contagious. He now went on, in a still more lively vein than that in which he had spoken before.

"We haven't got around to street improvements yet, but that will come—yes, that will come. And we already have the best near-by farming and stock-raising land in the world. Good grass, good water, good timber and good health overflow. You won't have to keep your cows and horses in the barn six months of the year, like you do in Illinois."

"I never come from Illinois, me. You must know that, yes, just hearin' me talk," Villac remarked with a grin. "I'm from Breaux Bridge, me, same like you."

"Breaux Bridge, eh? Strange we never met before."

"We been livin' in Lacombe, lately, the whole family, us. My wife's people, them, come from there. Now my brudder-in-law make up his mind they all oughta move to Slidell. Me, I don't fancy no livin' in Slidell, so I tell my wife, her, I got relations, too, named Primeaux, that's homesteadin' out here an' mebbe we could homestead out here ourselves with my relations."

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"I hope you do, I hope you do. You're welcome, Mr. Villac, most welcome. Now I guess this little lady's tired standing here while we go on talking, and I haven't begun to tell you half of what I wanted to. Why don't you let me drive you all down to the Crowley House?"

While he was speaking, a covered conveyance, with a lean, sandy-haired man in the driver's seat, had approached the platform and drawn up beside it.

"Why, that's very kind of you," Mary said gratefully.

They all climbed into the surrey and the horse began to flounder through the mud in the direction of the hotel. "You've already seen the depot. Good-looking building, isn't it? Besides that and the hotel, we've got a livery stable, a blacksmith's shop and store," Mr. Duson continued. "Of course, the hotel isn't finished yet, but they can put you up for the night all right. There'll be hammering going on as soon as daylight comes, but that's going on everywhere and anyhow you won't want to spend all your time sleeping."

He pointed proudly toward the skeletal form of a frame building which rose before them in the midst of the treeless bog through which they were floundering.

Mary pressed her lips tightly together and Brent, after glancing quickly at her, turned to meet the quizzical gaze of Ursin Villac.

"Well, here we are," Mr. Duson exclaimed as the surry came to a stop.

He climbed nimbly down over the wheel, his feet, encased in heavy boots, sinking far into the mud as he did so. Then he held out his arms and swung first Lavinia and then Mary clear of the mire and onto the wooden steps of the Crowley House. Brent, Villac and Claude, all laden with bags, scrambled after them.

The hotel still lacked a door and the interior, jammed with a milling crowd, was plainly visible. It consisted of one vast room, unplastered and unpapered; an immense counter, running across one end of it, served as a bar and was doing a lively business.

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Duson, after glancing quickly around, singled out a man who was starting for the bar, in company with two boon companions and, catching him by the shoulder, swung him around. "Mr. and Mrs. Winslow of Illinois want accommodations for themselves and their little girl, Dominic," he said. "Mr. Villac and Mr. Villac's little boy will be needing some, too."

The stocky individual thus addressed appeared to take the suggestion as a huge joke. "Accommodations?" he echoed, with a loud guffaw. "Something like what they'd get at the St. Charles, down in New Orleans, I presume? We've got all the men who've come in here bunking together, on one side of a partition upstairs, and most of the women and kids on another." He squirmed slightly, for Duson's grasp on his shoulder had tightened, and he took a second look at Mary. "Well, there are one or two little cubbyholes boarded off," he admitted. "If you'll come with me, ma'am. . . . Of course, the rest of you can follow along if you want to," he remarked, as if in afterthought. "I suppose you've got to put your bags down before you start for the auction."

He led the way up a flight of rickety stairs and turned to the left, where something which had once presumably served as a sheet hung in front of an otherwise open doorway. Raising this dingy drapery, he disclosed a bed covered with a quilt of doubtful cleanliness, one straight-backed chair in an extremely battered condition, and an unpainted pine table surmounted by a chipped bowl and pitcher. Lavinia, who had scampered ahead of the others, was the first to peep inside. She swung around and faced her parents incredulously.

"Is this our new home?" she inquired. "The one Father said would be better than the other that we had before?"

Mary was so tired that she would have been thankful enough to lie down, uninviting as the dingy bed appeared. But Brent was already in the doorway and Lavinia was tugging at her hand, eager to get to the auction. She could not let them guess how exhausted she was or lag behind. She quickened her foot-

steps to keep pace with theirs, and they clattered down the rickety stairs and wove their way through the big beamed room, with the crowded bar, toward the outside of the Crowley House.

Mr. Duson, with Mr. Villac and Claude beside him, was watching for them. "It looks as if the auction was about to begin," he beamed. "That's my brother C. C.—'Curley' we mostly call him—going up on the stand right now."

They looked in the direction he indicated and saw that "C. C." was more heavily built, more ruddy of complexion and even more jovial of manner than "W. W."

"Here we are, ladies and gentlemen," he announced in a ringing voice. "It is three o'clock on February 10th, and you are standing in the heart of Crowley, Louisiana, the city with a future."

"Let's move over there, friends," W. W. admonished the little group that was with him. "You want to get a good pick of the farmland and lots, and to do that you'll need to be nearer."

"Don't mind the mud, that's only a temporary inconvenience," the auctioneer was assuring his hearers, as they walked in his direction. "Our city is well laid out. This avenue on which you stand will be the principal thoroughfare. It's a hundred and fifteen feet wide. That square to the north is for the courthouse and we'll have business firms up and down both sides of the avenue and an expanse of grassy parkway in the middle. Now look around you, folks, and see the vast prairie that surrounds you. Practically no swamp or wasteland, ample timber bordering all the streams, fertile soil, ideal for almost any kind of crops, unsurpassed for rice. You can grow that all over this prairie, acres and acres of it. The natural rainfall will keep it watered. The first lots that go on sale today are right here to the west of us. Terms are one-half cash and the rest in twelve months, without interest. What am I bid for Lot 19, Block 64? What am I bid for this fine large lot right in the center of our fair city?"

"Ten dollars," Brent said suddenly.

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"We have a bid of ten dollars for Lot 19. Seems a shame to sell it by itself, when there's another just as large right beside it. How about bidding on both together, Mr. —?"

"Winslow. All right, I'll bid on both. Twenty dollars."

"Twenty-five!" shouted a man.

"Thirty!" Brent called quickly.

For the first time, the bidding became really brisk. Mary, looking at Brent in speechless astonishment, heard him go from one higher figure to another with such rapidity and such apparent recklessness that she was breathless with mounting apprehension and excitement. They did not have forty dollars to spare, she was sure of that. Much less fifty—sixty—seventy.

"Brent!" she whispered, putting her hand on his arm. Apparently, her husband neither saw her nor heard her. "Seventy-five!" he cried belligerently.

Mary was conscious of an astonished gasp from someone near by, and of some indistinct mutterings farther off. But the men who had been bidding against Brent were silent as C. C. resumed his accustomed chant.

"Seventy-five once, seventy-five twice, seventy-five three times for Lots 19 and 20, the finest in the residential part of this city and the highest priced for any so far. We throw in Lot 23, a good business location. We don't usually throw in such sites, but then we don't get many fellows like Mr. Winslow here, either."

The bidding went steadily on for another hour or more, but there was not a second sudden spurt of excitement, like the one Brent had started, and Mary was still too dazed to grasp the details of what was going on. Finally she realized that the auction was over. C. C. Duson had come down from the block and joined his brother; they were both busy congratulating the new landowners and telling them what remarkable bargains they had secured.

Eventually, Ursin Villac reappeared, with Claude in tow, and

asked the Winslows to join them for supper. He was so obviously eager that Mary did not need any prompting from Brent to accept the invitation, much as she longed to be alone with her husband, in order that he might privately explain the extraordinary happenings of the afternoon. So they ate unfamiliar food in the midst of noise and confusion; then they thanked Villac for his hospitality and went upstairs. By this time, Lavinia was too tired and drowsy to ask any questions. She undressed quickly, and within a few minutes was sound asleep. But Mary made no move to undress or even to sit down. She confronted Brent, not accusingly, but resolutely.

"Brent, I told you I was willing to do anything you thought best, to go anywhere you wanted to go. But I don't understand what you think best, I don't know where you want to go. You bought two lots here in Crowley today, but they're just bogs. There can't be any houses on them for—weeks, maybe months."

"You haven't lost faith in me, have you, Mary? You haven't stopped believing that I really did come here to find us a better home than we'd had before?" Brent asked. He had taken hold of her shoulders and was looking straight into her eyes. She drew a deep breath, but she met the searching gaze squarely and unflinchingly.

"No," she said. "I haven't lost faith in you. But I want you to tell me now, so that I can tell Lavinia when she wakes up in the morning."

"All right. I will tell you now. I didn't think the time had come to tell you before, but I guess it has today."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and drew her down beside him. "When I came south last spring, I bought some land, about five miles from here," he said. "Around two hundred acres."

"*You bought two hundred acres when you came down here in the spring!*" she echoed. "Why, how could you, without any money? We didn't sell our farm until after you came back, and

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it took all we had in the savings bank to pay your traveling expenses that first time!"

"I know. But I did have some money besides that. Your father gave me some—loaned me some, rather. He said he knew I'd pay it back when I got around to it, and it didn't matter when that was. He said he'd never miss it. This was money he'd made unexpectedly on some harness races at the County Fair. The reason I didn't tell you was because I wanted to give you a surprise when we did come together—to have you find out we didn't need to start from scratch, that I'd made a beginning for us already. The land I bought had already been homesteaded and it has a house on it—a one-room house made of split logs. It's about eighteen feet square, so we won't be crowded in it. Of course, it'll be just a makeshift, but it'll do until we can have something better. There's plenty of water available and there's a well pump in the yard. There's been one vegetable garden on the place and we can start another one right away. We'll be getting stuff out of it before the ground's even begun to thaw in Illinois. Those lots I bought today don't count to me—not in terms of a home. I only bought them to sell again—for ten times what I paid for them, or more. It's the farmland that's going to give us that home I talked to you about. Inside of a few years you can have any kind of a house you want. But when it comes to a place for it, I hope it'll be out where I'm taking you tomorrow. Because that's where I want us to live."

CHAPTER THREE

As Mr. Duson had predicted, the sounds of hammering proved an effective alarm clock the next morning. By seven o'clock the Winslows and most of their fellow immigrants had foregathered in the main room of the Crowley House for breakfast. While they were still eating, "W. W." came in to bid them all good morning and asked if there were anything he could do to be helpful.

"I make a practice of driving anyone who's interested out to look over the land around here," he said genially. "Surrey's at the door right now. Any customers?"

"I suppose you mean just prospects, don't you?" Brent inquired, emptying his cup and looking up. "As I'm sure you know, I own some property that's been homesteaded already, besides those three lots I bought yesterday. I'm not in the market for any more land. But my wife's anxious to see the farm, and we were wondering what the best way would be to get there."

"The best way for you to travel is right along with me," Mr. Duson assured him. "You may think you're not in the market for any more land, but there's another small parcel, right alongside of what you've bought already, that isn't worth much in itself, but that would add a lot to the value of yours, eventually."

"Mebbe you could find a little place in the surrey, yes, fo' me'n Claude, too?" inquired Ursin Villac. "My relations I tol' you about yesterday, named Primeaux, they homesteadin' right close by where Mr. Winslow an' his folks is movin' at."

"Of course, we can make room for you, Mr. Villac," Mr. Duson responded with his usual enthusiasm. "Now, what about you, Mr. Glenny?" he inquired, addressing another gentleman.

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"Made up your mind yet whether to grasp the great opportunities we're offering?"

It appeared that Mr. Glenny had still come to no such decision, so the others set forth without him, first stopping at the depot to claim the Winslows' two trunks, and to tell the agent these would be called for later; then going on to the store. As they jogged along, Mr. Duson, besides pointing out everything he thought might be of interest in the rather drab landscape, also spoke about practical matters. Some of the immigrants were clubbing together and hiring a freight car, he said, to bring down their household effects and farm implements. Mr. Winslow could easily get whatever he needed at Rayne or at Opelousas—one day's shopping would take care of all that. Ursin Villac broke in at this point to say he was sure the Primeaux would be glad to lend whatever was most necessary along that line; any man would be glad to let a neighbor take a cart or a plow or such, for a day or so. Brent thanked him and said he would appreciate this very much, but that of course he would see about getting equipment of his own, right away. . . . What about farm animals, he wanted to know next. Well, there would be no difficulty about those, either, Mr. Duson and Ursin Villac hastened to tell him, speaking almost simultaneously; one settler would have a mule he could spare, another a cow, another a few hens; they would look around for a good yoke of oxen; and, as for the small Cajun ponies, running around half wild, all he would have to do would be to catch a couple, or more if he needed them.

"I can help catch them," Lavinia volunteered eagerly at this point.

"And I could help, if you couldn't do it alone," Claude announced proudly.

"Well, that's very kind of you, Claude," Brent said, looking at the young Cajun with appreciation of the boy's friendliness. "As a matter of fact, Lavinia probably *could* go out and get a halter on a colt, if it was one of her grandfather's. Of course, it's different when it comes to wild ponies."

BLUE CAMELLIA

Since leaving the vicinity of the Crowley House, the travelers had come upon only two or three forlorn shacks, which might easily have been vacant as well as isolated, for they betrayed little or no evidence of human habitation.

"There now!" Mr. Duson remarked with satisfaction. "That's the beginning of your land right over there to the left, Mr. Winslow, beyond that split cypress fence. And if you look hard you can see your house a piece back."

They all gazed intently in the direction toward which Mr. Duson was pointing. At first, they could see nothing except a small dark cube, which stood out against the sky above the dun-colored grass, not far from the first clump of trees they had come across in a long time. But, as they continued to stare at it, they could make out a smaller cube beside it and, gradually, the two took on the character of buildings.

"Cypress slab," Mr. Duson informed Mary. "That's what most of the homesteaders around here used for their first houses. Got it from Lyon's Point, about ten miles from where we are now. Comes in mighty handy for building material. You've got a kitchen—that's the smaller building—and a dogtrot between that and the larger one, so you'll be protected from the rain, going back and forth. You don't have to be protected from the cold, because there isn't any. And I took the liberty at the store of telling Frankel to have a secondhand cookstove I've been advertising for sale for quite some time loaded on with the rest of your stuff. If you don't like it, you can send it right back where it came from—no obligation whatsoever. But I thought it might come in handy until you could get something better."

"Thank you," Mary said gratefully. "It was very kind of you—very kind and thoughtful."

"Well, now," Mr. Duson replied, "we all help each other out around here, like I said before. You'll find the Primeaux'll want to help, too. Their place isn't more than half a mile farther along. I figured on taking Mr. Villac and Claude over there, soon's I'd let you off. Then, on my way back, I'll stop in and see whether you can make out, right away, with what you've

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got here, or whether you want to stay at the Crowley House for a while longer. I stowed away a jug of water, in case your well pump doesn't work, and a few victuals underneath the front seat, enough for your noon meal, according to my reckoning. I'll have mine with the Primeaux and, like as not, some of them will be coming by this afternoon, too. They'll want to welcome you to God's country."

While he was talking, the surrey had gradually come nearer and nearer to the two small slab buildings, connected with a covered passageway. As the surrey came to a stop, Brent climbed out and, strode over to the doorway of the larger building and unfastened it.

The sun poured in through the wide opening, filling the long-closed room with warmth and light and patterning the hard-packed earthen floor with its radiance. For a moment, Brent stood very still, looking carefully around him, but this was only to make sure everything was all right. There was no element of strangeness to him in the place; he had stayed there when he came to Louisiana. He had been at peace with himself and the world then for the first time since his long illness, and confident of the future's promise in this land; now that he had Mary and Lavinia with him, he had a greater sense of responsibility and challenge.

He turned and started back toward the surrey. He had intended to lift his wife and daughter down over the wheel. But they had forestalled him by alighting without his help and were now coming forward to meet him. He put his arm around Mary's shoulders and gave Lavinia his free hand. Then the three went together, side by side, toward their new home.

The first thing he must do, Brent said, was to make sure the well pump was working all right; it was thoughtful of Mr. Duson to have supplied them with a jug of water, but that would not last long.

While Brent was working on the pump, Mary found a broom

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of sorts in one of the cupboards and she swept out both houses and, with Lavinia's help, carried the mattress outdoors. They were all glad to sit down and eat by the time their first labors were finished for they were rather tired and very hungry. They had just finished when the oxcart, laden with their baggage and provisions and the secondhand cookstove, came jolting into sight. The driver unloaded everything and helped set up the stove; and, by the time this was done, the surrey had returned, with Mr. Duson.

"Well, I see you're not only getting along all right, but making out fine," he said, looking around him with a comprehensive and approving glance. "Villac isn't going back with me tonight. Matter of fact, it's settled already that he and Primeaux are going into partnership, though, of course, Villac's got to collect his family. I don't know how many young ones he's got, but it sure is a quiverful, as the Good Book says. And Primeaux has another tribe, all wild as hawks. He lost his wife a while back, and he's tickled to death with the idea of having Villac's wife take over. Where on earth they'll all sleep, I don't know—he's got a frame house already, the first one out this way; but it's no hotel for size and that's about what he needs. . . . Speaking of hotels, looks to me as if the one in Crowley has lost some good customers," he concluded, with a questioning look at Mary. "That is, if you really think you can manage with what you've got here."

"Yes, I'm sure we can," she answered with a quiet conviction that sent a tremor of pride through Brent's consciousness. "That is, if you go on helping us."

"Anything I can do, anything at all," Mr. Duson assured her. "What was it you had in mind exactly, Mrs. Winslow?"

Mary glanced at Brent, whom she had had no opportunity to consult, and caught the approving nod which indicated she was to go ahead with suggestions. "When Brent was here last spring, he stayed with a Mr. Jean Castex, a carpenter, in Mermantau," she said. "And I thought—"

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"Know him well, know him well," Mr. Duson answered glibly. "Want I should get a message to him? See if he can come here and do some work for you?"

"Yes, please. We need another bed, for Lavinia. And I want shelves in the kitchen for my pots and pans and some sort of a larder. Of course, Brent could fix all that up, if he had to. But he's handier outdoors than indoors, and besides, of course he'll want to get started right away on his planting."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Duson agreed. "He'll need to begin plowing and harrowing right away, so that you can get your crops in. Things grow practically by themselves, down here. . . . Well, I'll be back in a few days, just to keep in touch. Don't ever like to lose sight of friends, once I've made them—especially when I've found just the kind of little girl I've been looking for all my life." He chuckled Lavinia under the chin and shook hands, in turn, with Mary and Brent, his departure apparently imminent. But, with his foot already on the step of the surrey, he turned back. "About that small tract I spoke of," he said, "people around here never call it anything except the 'wet patch' and that's what it is—almost worthless in itself, like I told you, so it's a great bargain. And, along with what you've got already, it could come in mighty handy. Anyway, I'll drive you over to have a look at that tract next time I come out this way. No harm in just having a look. No obligation whatsoever."

When he had finally taken his leave, Brent and Mary exchanged glances and laughed. Then they kissed each other. Lavinia laughed, too, without knowing quite why and then she sidled up to them, so that she could share in their embrace. They were all very happy.

Later in the afternoon, while they were resting after their day's work, they saw two boys coming toward them across the prairie. Each was leading an animal and each was carrying a basket. As they came a little nearer, the Winslows could see that one of the boys was Claude, that the animal he was leading

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was a cow and that the animal led by the boy they did not know was a mule.

"This is my cousin Fleex," Claude informed them. "His father, my Uncle Phares, sent us over. He thought you would need some milk for Lavinia and that you would want to start plowing soon as ever you could. So he is loaning you a cow and a mule. He thought you would like some eggs and some greens and some oranges, too."

"Oranges!" Lavinia exclaimed with astonished delight.

"Why, yes. Uncle Phares has got a real nice little grove. You can come over tomorrow and pick some yourself, if you want to. There's plenty more besides what we've got with us. Uncle Phares will be over tomorrow to bring you some pullets and a rooster, and a sodbuster, so you won't be delayed with your plowing. He couldn't come tonight because he's too busy visiting with my father."

Brent and Mary laughed again, and again Lavinia laughed with them. They had gone forward to meet the boys, for they already regarded Claude as a good companion, and they were quite prepared to welcome "Fleex" in the same role, though they were puzzled by his name, which they had not recognized as Felix. He lacked the inherent friendliness which made Claude's open countenance and genial expression so attractive; Fleex made no remarks on his own initiative and answered only in monosyllables when addressed; his hair was matted, his hands dirty and his clothing ragged.

Mary, remembering what Duson had said about Primeaux's loss, felt her heart go out in sympathy toward the motherless boy. His roving glance did not prevent her from seeing that he had exceptionally fine dark eyes, his infrequent and seemingly reluctant smile disclosed teeth almost startlingly white. If Villac's wife were kindly and efficient, she was confident there would soon be a change for the better in this neglected lad's appearance and manner. She spoke to Felix kindly, asking how many brothers and sisters he had. Two sisters and one brother, he

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answered, without volunteering any information about their names or ages. It was Claude who gave this, along with some correlative data.

"Fleex is the oldest," he said. "Fifteen, two years older than me. Then there's Mezalee, just my age, and Marcelite, a year younger. Clement's only five—there were some that died in between. Us, we're all alive. My mother's name is Anne and my sister Annette was called after her. Then there's Odile and Onezime and Odey and Olin."

"My, what a lot of names beginning with O!" Lavinia exclaimed.

"Yes, aren't there? I reckon Papa and Maman kind of got the habit and found it hard to stop. But we're going to get started on the P's now. If the new baby's a girl, we'll name it Pauline. If it's a boy, we can name it Paul, so everything's all settled, either way."

It was not customary, in Monroe, to speak of new babies before their arrival. Mary hastened to change the subject. "Has the cow been milked yet this evening?" she inquired.

"No, ma'am, not yet. Would you like me to milk her for you? I'm a right good milker, me, for my age."

Mary thought it rather strange that Felix had not made this offer, since he was two years older than Claude and, since it was his father to whom the cow belonged. But she accepted Claude's suggestion gratefully.

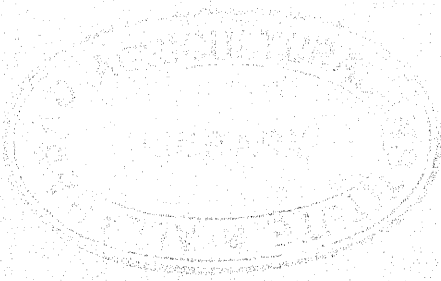
"It was kind of Phares Primeaux to send over the animals and the provisions and to promise he'd come over himself, as soon as he wasn't too busy visiting," Brent said when the boys had taken their departure. "But, to tell the truth, I don't take to his son Felix at all. I hope he won't have a bad influence on Claude, who's a fine little fellow."

"Why should he? Isn't it just as likely that Claude will have a good influence on him?"

"I don't know. I hope so," Brent answered. He did not sound especially hopeful, but Mary knew this was because he was

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tired. It had been a crowded and an exciting day. Without pressing him any further, Mary went on with her preparations for supper, though she could not dismiss the thought of the two boys from her own mind; and every now and then she glanced at Lavinia. She believed what she had said: that Claude would be a good influence on Felix, and while she had not added aloud that Lavinia should be a good influence on both, this, also, had occurred to her.



CHAPTER FOUR

In a relatively short time, the Winslows' life took on a well-ordered pattern. The extra shelves, the presses and the wood flooring in the little cypress slab house gave it added comfort and convenience; and the day's shopping trip to Opelousas provided the commodities which had not been obtainable nearer at hand, besides affording the family a pleasant outing. Their vegetable garden was coming up finely, as were the fields of oats and corn that Brent planted. There had been quite a search for just the right yoke of oxen, but this had finally been found and, meanwhile, Sadie, the mule, had sufficed for every major farm need.

Besides the oxen, Brent purchased a sow that was soon to farrow, a bull calf and six cows. As Duson had predicted, it had required no cash outlay and very little effort to secure a couple of Cajun ponies. As a matter of fact, Fleex had not only caught them, but broken them, and had shown great skill in the matter. Praise of his prowess had brought to the boy's face the first responsive smile that Brent had ever succeeded in evoking. From then on, there was less strain between them, and Brent was willing to concede that there was some good in Fleex after all, adding that, of course, Mrs. Villac had done wonders in bringing this out, even in the short time since her arrival.

Anne Villac was a roly-poly little woman, with snapping black eyes, and an infectious laugh. Everything about her was round, not only her figure, but her face and features. The Villacs had arrived, bag and baggage, about a fortnight after the Winslows, and the children were constantly going back and forth between the two places.

The Villacs and the Primeaux were the Winslows' only near

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neighbors, a scant half mile away across the prairie; but they had other visitors, all of whom proved friendly. One of these was Dr. Mouton, the kindly physician whose practice was largely among the pioneers, though nominally he lived in Rayne. The Winslows all kept in the best of health throughout that first spring and summer; but, if Dr. Mouton were called to anyone out their way, he was apt to stop just for the sake of sociability.

Another welcome caller, and the most regular one of all, was Anna Kutsch, who rode out over the prairies several times a week, delivering mail. They did not have a great deal of mail and they looked forward to Anna's visits, just as they did to Dr. Mouton's, for the enjoyment of her presence. Brent was an only child, and his father and mother had not approved of the move to Louisiana; one of the ways they showed their disapproval was by the infrequency of their letters.

It remained for Mary's father to send the immigrants news of more general character. Jim Garland did his best, but it did not come naturally for him to express himself on paper, and one day, after Anna had taken her departure, Mary opened an envelope from him with no great anticipation of interest. But, because she *was* tired, she sat down in one of the rockers which had lately been added to their household equipment; and, after a time, Brent, coming back briefly to the house during a break in his work, realized that she had remained seated far longer than was her habit. He looked at her questioningly and then, struck by a certain strangeness in her expression, came over and put his hand on her shoulder.

"You haven't had bad news, have you, Mary?"

"No, not exactly. That is . . . Brent, Father wants to come and live with us. He's got it all planned. He says he can come for nothing in an immigrant car. All our furniture and all of his that he wants to bring with him would come in the same car. His livestock, too. He says he'd feel better if we had some real horses, not just these Cajun ponies we've told him about. He

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wants Lavinia to grow up a really fine horsewoman and he thinks you and I are too busy to see that she has the proper training. He says he doesn't like to think of us living in a one-room house, either—he's got so he's brooding over it. He knows we can't afford anything better just yet, but he's prepared to help us pay for a better one—a better one and a bigger one, so that there would be room for him. That's what he says. But, Brent, I can't help being afraid—"

"Yes, Mary?"

"I can't help being afraid that he isn't happy. Not just because he misses Mother so much, but because Sally and Jonathan have made him feel—well, that he's in the way, that they want the place to themselves. I know you don't want to build until after the first crops are harvested. But if Father helped pay for the house—"

"I don't want that, either. I was grateful for the money that made it possible for me to get this place. But I said, from the beginning, it must be just a loan and I'd rather not borrow any more—much less take anything as a gift. I like your father, you know that, Mary. But I want this to be *our* house, yours and Lavinia's and mine. I wouldn't feel it was, if someone else's money went into it."

"On the other hand, you don't want Father to feel that he isn't welcome with either of his daughters, do you, Brent?"

"No, of course not. We must think of some way to manage."

There was a short silence. It was Brent who broke it, speaking thoughtfully. "Once, when Primeaux was over here, and he and I were standing outside talking, he said I'd always have a use for this house, even after we moved into a better one, because by-and-by, when I got to having hired hands, they'd need some place to bunk. He said he'd seen one place that had two cypress slab houses built on it, while it was being homesteaded, and they'd both come in handy after a while. Maybe your father'd take the money he thought of letting us have and build himself a house on our land. Then, later on, after we got our

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new one, he could move in with us or stay in his own, just as he preferred. My guess is he'd rather stay in his own, except for meals—naturally, he'd take those with us, his dinner anyway."

"Brent, I think you've had a wonderful idea. I think that's just what we ought to suggest."

"He'll want more shelter for his horses than any we've got for our animals, so far, too," Brent continued. "Not just a lean-to—a real stable, probably with quarters for a stableboy attached. I'll find out, right away, how soon we could get the lumber he'd need, and how Castex is fixed for building time. I've been meaning to have a talk with Duson, anyway. . . . You remember that tract he kept harping on?"

"The wet patch? The one he said was worthless?"

"Worthless *by itself*. Not if it were part of our property. And Primeaux thinks it's much better suited for my rice crop than the place I was planning to sow. A patch ought to be wet for rice and this one would provide better drainage than any I've got elsewhere. I'm planning to sow at least twenty acres with rice and, if I can get the best conditions for growing it by spending a little extra now, I ought to be able to make up for it later."

"Is there enough money left?"

"I think so—just about. If not, I know Duson will give me credit and I don't mind taking advantage of that."

He did not have to take advantage of it; a bargain Duson had promised, and a bargain the wet patch should be, he told Brent as soon as he was approached on the subject. Brent had taken title to it, plowed, disk-harrowed it and begun the slow and wearisome process of hand sowing, by the time the cypress slabs for the second house and the lumber for the stable arrived.

By the time the new buildings were finished, the young plants were coming up slim and straight, jade green in color and very beautiful. Mary, who had viewed the other crops with satisfaction, but with no sense of wonderment, was awed by this

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beauty of the young rice. Nearly every afternoon, no matter how tired she was, she walked over to the edge of the wet patch and stood gazing at it, entranced. And it was to this tract of land that she eagerly led her father the evening after his arrival.

"Isn't that the loveliest sight you ever saw?" she asked him. "The green rice—the red sunset—the pink clouds in the blue sky. . . ."

"You certainly have got an eye for color," he told her teasingly. "But yes—I'll admit it's pretty. I won't go so far as to say it's the prettiest thing I ever saw, but it *is* pretty. From what I hear, rice is a pretty chancy crop though. It requires a lot of water. What happens when there isn't enough rain?"

"I'm afraid there isn't a very good crop, either. But you see, people hereabouts trust in Providence that there will be. That's why they call this 'Providence' rice."

"I see. Well, it's a good thing to trust in Providence. But I believe the Almighty likes a little co-operation now and again. To my way of thinking, it wouldn't be a bad plan to try and figure out some way of getting artificial irrigation."

"Well, you and Brent must talk that over. I know he'd be glad of any suggestions."

"I'm not so sure. Brent's always struck me as a man who liked to figure things out for himself. And he doesn't do so badly at it, given time. Don't tell him what I said right away, Mary. See if he doesn't say it himself, before long."

It required considerable self-control for Mary to act on her father's advice, but she managed to do so, helped, not inconsiderably, by the fact that the early summer was one of abundant rainfall and that the Providence rice in the wet patch ripened without a setback, though not without constant care. Brent had bought the best Honduras seed he could obtain; but he had quickly learned that he must be on the lookout for the indigo and the red rice that could damage and even spoil his crop. He weeded it early and late, finding willing and efficient help from his father-in-law and Joshua, the stableboy Jim Garland had brought with him.

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When the rice headed in September, it was as golden as it had once been green, waist high and of the same density as wheat. The excellence and abundance of the crop were both unquestionable. When Mary gazed out over it now, at eventide, it was not only beauty of which she was conscious, despite her awareness that the landscape was more beautiful than ever.

It had been decided, in family conclave and acting upon the advice of their more experienced neighbors, that, since the reaping would take at least three weeks, it must be started before all the rice was fully ripe; even so, some of it would be over-ripe before it was harvested. No effort was spared to prevent an unwelcome degree of maturity. The men breakfasted, hurriedly, in the darkness before dawn, in order to be out with their sickles by daybreak, and Mary and Lavinia carried mid-morning coffee and their dinner to the field. The Winslows' rice had ripened a little earlier than the Villacs' and Primeaux' and this meant that the friendly Cajuns were able to help.

News about the surprising excellence of Brent Winslow's rice crop quickly spread by word of mouth. Jean Castex spread it, not only in Mermentau where he lived, but in every place where his skill in carpentry called him. Villac and Primeaux spread it among their Cajun kith and kin, who were scattered all the way from Breaux Bridge to Lake Charles. Anna Kutsch spread it on her mail route; Dr. Mouton on his medical rounds. The Dusons spread it in Rayne and Opelousas and in the new settlements they were busily promoting.

The stack of greenbacks which represented the profits of Brent's excellent rice crop continued to grow, and his chief interest lay in what this might mean to his family. He and Mary counted it together, over and over again; and one day, in mid-December, he hitched up the Cajun ponies and drove off to Mermentau to see Jean Castex and ask him what it would cost to build a house—a real house and not a cypress slab cabin; a house that stood two stories high, a house with a porch and an ell, in short, the house that Mary had dreamed about and talked about for years. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Mary had not minded the hard work; she had never minded that; anyway, the worst of the drudgery was behind them now. A colored couple, Vacey and Dulsu, were living in a shack which Castex had run up from odds and ends of lumber left over after he had finished their new house. Dulsu was as useful to Brent as Vacey was to Mary. Brent had better machinery now, and a good buggy of his own. He was not worrying about money any more, either, for he had doubled the income from his rice. The lightening of his load, both physical and mental, represented a corresponding lightening of Mary's, as far as he was concerned. But she was increasingly troubled about Lavinia.

"Brent, I've got to talk to you about Lavinia," she told her husband one afternoon when Lavinia had gone to spend the day with the Villacs.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked in genuine amazement. "I thought she was as fit as a fiddle."

"She is, physically. But she's growing up completely ignorant."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that! She'd had some schooling before we left Illinois and—"

"How much?"

"Well, not much, but it must have laid the foundations for her to go on by herself. And it's good for Lavinia to be outdoors. She's the picture of health. And she's pretty, too. She doesn't seem to be headed for any awkward age. It wouldn't surprise me if she were *quite* pretty by the time she's eighteen."

"And then someone will fall in love with her and she'll get married while she's still ignorant and remain ignorant all her life."

"Good Lord, you are borrowing trouble! Can't you take time

yourself to teach her what you want her to learn now that you've got Vicky to help you?"

"I could take the time all right—I *would* take it, no matter what else I left undone, but I don't know enough to teach her what I want her to learn—French, for instance."

"Why, I hear her chattering away with our Cajun friends; I thought she'd picked up a lot of French from them—they talk it half the time. Fleex most of the time."

"She has—that kind. But that's not real French—it's not even good French. I want her to learn to speak it the way educated people do, in France and—well—everywhere. Besides, it's a question of music, too. She played very well—once—for a child of her age and she loved her lessons. It's a surprise to me—a great disappointment—that she isn't interested any more."

"Just what do you want me to do about it, Mary?" Brent asked. "I can't teach her those things, either. And she couldn't learn them around here, even if she went to one of those shacks they call schoolhouses—you know as well as I do that only boys go to those, pretty rough customers, some of them, too. I suppose the girls do grow up ignorant. I remember getting that impression when we first came here, and we asked Primeaux about his daughters' education. But they seem to get along all right."

"The girls whose parents can afford it are sent away to school."

"You want to send Lavinia away!"

For the first time, he was roused. The prospect of a house, of barns and fields, gardens and groves, devoid of Lavinia's presence was appalling to him.

"I'd miss her just as much as you would, Brent," Mary said earnestly. "But I'm thinking of her good—not our pleasure. I wasn't thinking of sending her far. The place I thought of was Grand Coteau. The Sacred Heart Nuns run a very famous school there."

"You'd sent her to a *Catholic* school!"

"Lots of Protestant girls go there, too, Brent. There isn't any

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proselyting—I've been assured of that," Mary went on. "And those nuns are wonderful women. All I want you to do now is to say you'll keep an eye on Lavinia for a day or two while I go over to Grand Coteau. I could find out whether I thought it was really a good place to send a little girl and how much it would cost and all that. It wouldn't do any harm, would it, just to find out?"

"No," Brent muttered reluctantly. "It wouldn't do any harm—just to find out. But remember, if you do go for a day or two, that doesn't mean I'm willing you should tell the principal, or whatever she's called, that everything's decided, that we'll send Lavinia there a week from the next Monday."

Brent was waiting for Mary at the depot in Crowley on her return from her visit; he had missed her more than he would have believed possible. After a warm embrace, he suggested that they should have supper at the Crowley House.

She thought perhaps they ought to get back to Lavinia, but Brent reassured her. Lavinia was with her grandfather, having a fine time; the old gentleman had invited in three or four of the Villacs and Primeaux—Brent wasn't sure which ones—to keep her company. In the face of all this, Mary could not very well hold out and besides, she was eager to tell Brent about her experiences. As soon as they were seated at their table, she began her story.

"The Mother Superior and the Mistress General were very kind—very understanding. They said they'd be glad to take Lavinia at the beginning of the next term—that's early in March, about a month from now. The tuition is one hundred and fifty dollars a year—a full year. Of course, for just the last semester it would be only half that much. We can afford to spend seventy-five dollars for tuition this spring, can't we, Brent?"

"I guess so. We can scrimp on something else," Brent said. He drew a deep breath. "I know you want Lavinia to have a good education and I do, too. I gather you think she'll get it

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at Grand Coteau and, the more I think of it, the more I'm inclined to agree with you."

"It's the most beautiful place I ever saw, Brent," Mary went on earnestly. "The *allée* of pines—the long white colonnade—the camellias—why, I never imagined anything like them! They're not bushes, they're trees! And the flowers on them don't fade in the ordinary way—they drop to the ground, still almost whole, in such quantities that they form a lovely carpet. I just stood and looked at them, for minutes and minutes. And what do you think? When the Mistress General saw how I felt about them, she gave me a cutting!"

"Your blue camellia at last, Mary?"

He leaned across the table and took her hand. There was a warmth in his voice that had not been there lately, while he was working so hard and striving so doggedly for success. She returned the pressure of his handclasp, looking at him lovingly, and spoke lightly, too.

"No," she said, "it's pink. I'm expecting you to give me the blue one."

She would have to wait a long time, he told her. He said it good naturedly, so that his response to her remark united the two in a shared jest and, from time to time, they referred to it again. But they were both so preoccupied with matters far more pressing, that neither thought about mythical things, like blue camellias, often.

Lavinia's absence had not given her mother more leisure; it had only given her more time to devote to the better organization of her house and the development of her garden. The rice was waist high again now, and more abundant than ever. The day was very warm and Mary was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, when Brent burst in on her with a precipitancy that was uncharacteristic.

"Mary, I want you to come out to the field with me. I want to show you something. I think I've made a discovery."

There was an urgency in his face as well as in his voice.

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Without questioning him further, Mary told Vacey to keep an eye on the pot roast, and went with him through the yard and the hayfield to the wet patch.

He walked so rapidly that she had hard work keeping up with him, but he did not say anything more until they had neared the field. Then he took her hand and plunged off the levee into the burgeoning rice. He had only gone a few feet, however, when he stopped with the same suddenness that marked everything else he had been doing.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed

"Yes, Brent, I am looking. It's a wonderful crop, our best yet."

"It is, but I don't mean that. Look at the heads—the flowers. Can't you see anything unusual about them?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"Well, I can. They—the flowers—have opened up, but they'll only stay open a little while, just the way morning glories, for instance, and water lilies open up and then close later in the day. You've seen both of those. Night-blooming cereus, that you've only read about, does the same thing."

Mary bent over to look at the golden flowers more closely. Then she looked back at Brent, with growing wonderment.

"Why, I believe you're right! They do seem to have opened up! I wonder if it's just an accident."

"It isn't. This happens every day."

"Then why haven't you—why haven't we—noticed it before?"

"Because it only lasts a little while each day. Because we've always been so rushed. These flowers bloom at noon, just our dinner-time, and close by one o'clock. This is the third day I've watched them. I didn't want to tell you until I was sure. And then I suddenly felt I couldn't wait any longer. Because, if they do open—"

"Yes, Brent?"

"Nothing. That is, nothing I'm ready to say yet. But I want you to come out here with me at noon every day for a week and

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watch those flowers. I want you to tell me if you don't think I'm right."

She was certain he was right; she was able to assure him with proud confidence, after she had watched this phenomenon with him every day for the specified time. She did not ask him what he meant to do; it did not seem to matter. What mattered was that he would do something, the best thing, when the time was ripe. Neither of them guessed that the time would come so soon, or what form it would take.

Brent went but rarely into town, and that mostly in the slack season. But one day a broken shovel handle resulted in an emergency and Brent hitched up the ponies and started for Crowley. When he came back, hours later, he lifted a pail covered with wire screening carefully from the buggy and called to Mary. As she opened the door and called in return, her greeting was interrupted by an exclamation of amazement.

"What on earth have you got there?" she asked.

"Bees," Brent replied laconically.

He set his pail carefully down on the porch steps and grinned at her. "I happened to glance up, just to see what the weather looked like, as I was coming out of Frankel's," he said, "and what do you think I saw? A swarm of bees on one of the telegraph poles. So I went back to Frankel's and got a stepladder and a broom and a pail and I dislodged the entire swarm. We've got a new colony started. I've wired to New Orleans for supplies—Frankel told me about a firm where I could get them. Frankel knows about almost everything, just as he keeps almost everything. But there's one thing he doesn't know. I told him I was going to set up my new hives in our grove and get an Italian queen. I told him it would seem good to have bees again, that I'd missed them more than anything else I'd left behind when we came here. But I didn't tell him I was going to use them for cross-pollination. I didn't tell him I think I might get new and better varieties of rice with the help of the bees."

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Brent Winslow was now a man with one enduring purpose: the production of rice which, in both yield and quality, should surpass any hitherto grown, no matter where, and the dissemination of this rice to every part of the world.

In the beginning, the yield had not seemed to him much of a problem: since rice was self-pollinating, the more he planted, the more would continue to grow; but the quality would remain the same, unless he could hit on some way of improving it which he had not yet found. To be sure, a great deal had been accomplished by improved irrigation. But Brent had never felt that irrigation, despite its great importance in eliminating the hazard of drought, completely solved the problem. That, he was convinced, must be done by cross-pollination, and until it dawned on him that this might be done by bees, during the brief daily period when the rice flowers opened, he had sought in vain for the answer to the question which his clamoring mind demanded unceasingly.

The single colony of bees Brent first acquired was increased to ten, to twenty, to thirty. Though he had long insisted that flowers were Mary's province and not his, he now established an "experimental garden," beyond the feed pen for the cattle. In this garden, he spent endless hours; and here the various varieties of rice he sought to develop to a state of perfection were planted close together or far apart, depending on the degree of cross-pollination.

But he was not satisfied to confine his experiments to a garden, nor did he feel that cross-pollination was the only answer to his problem; selection must also enter into the picture. The family sitting room became the scene of equally intensive labors, and much of the night, as well as all of the day, was given over to work. Patiently, hour after hour, Brent would sit, hulling one grain of rice after another, and removing the bran with his thumbnail. This was to see whether there was a "chalky" grain or a "crystal" grain inside.

These processes were repeated indefinitely. In his absorption

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with his experiments, Brent did not notice that Lavinia was growing up until Mary called his attention to this.

The first time that she came home from school, he had not become so completely preoccupied, and she had not changed very greatly. To be sure, the parlor was no longer quiet, because she played the piano again, for hours at a time, sometimes by herself, but more frequently to the accompaniment of Fleex and his violin. Various members of the Villac-Primeaux tribe, as Brent continued to call it, were practically always present when she was there herself; and when she was not, she was out riding with them, or spending the day at their house, or something of the kind. Brent had long since overcome his initial dislike and distrust of Fleex, in the face of the boy's devotion both to his own family and to the Winslows. Disquieting rumors occasionally reached Brent, but these concerned the conduct of the boy elsewhere; Brent took it for granted, and rightly so, that they did not need to cause him anxiety in Lavinia's case.

In fact, he gave the matter of the association between the two very little thought. And the next summer Lavinia was not at home very much, because she went with her grandfather to Illinois.

When Jim Garland suggested it might be a good thing for Lavinia to see something of another part of the country, Brent had agreed with alacrity. Mary was not altogether willing, but she did not feel she should say so when Brent felt otherwise, when her father obviously wanted to renew old ties, and when Lavinia was straining at the leash to be off. She did not seem to be in the least apprehensive of homesickness or in dread of separation from her parents, an attitude which caused Mary more pangs than it did Brent; and the young girl did not voice—and evidently did not feel—any regret at parting from her accustomed boon companions. Claude and Mexalee, to whom her vacation meant simply heavy work on the farm, and who had been looking forward eagerly to interludes with their more fortunate friend, were hurt and a little jealous. Marcelite, who was

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married now, was busy at home with her new baby and Fleex had disappeared on one of his periodic mysterious absences; they could spare Lavinia better than the others could.

When she returned in the brief and hurried talks she had with her mother, before leaving for school, Lavinia chatted volubly.

"I was crazy about New Orleans, but I didn't like Chicago nearly as well," she said. "And I'm awfully glad you moved away from Monroe. I didn't remember how dismal it was until I saw it again."

"*Dismal?*"

"Yes. Aunt Sally doesn't have a flower garden. She says she doesn't have time for one, with a baby and everything. I don't see why not. Marcelite has a nice little flower garden—not as nice as yours, of course, but still it's pretty, and she takes care of her baby herself. Aunt Sally has a hired girl."

"Is the baby cunning?"

"Not nearly as cunning as Marcelite's. He's too fat. So is Aunt Sally."

"*Aunt Sally is too fat!*"

"Yes, lots. I told Grandpa I thought so, and he said he'd been afraid she might be, after she got married, because she'd always been plump. Of course, Mrs. Villac's rather fat, too. But *you're* not, Mother. You're not any fatter than I am, and you've been married ever so long."

Mary flushed. She was secretly proud of her figure, and though Brent was sparing of compliments, he occasionally told her, in a tone which implied admiration, that he did not believe she had gained a pound in twenty years.

"What about your uncle Jonathan? He hasn't grown fat, too, has he?"

"Oh, no! He looks just the way he did before—that is, the way I think he looked before. I'm not sure I remember exactly. And he was very nice to us when he was there."

"When he was there! Wasn't he there all the time?"

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"No, he was gone quite a good deal. I guess he just enjoys getting off by himself once in a while, the way Fleex does. I think he and Fleex are something alike."

"What nonsense!" Mary said, almost angrily. "They're not in the least alike. Jonathan Fant is a very cultured, traveled gentleman. Fleex is just a poor, ignorant Cajun."

"I wish you wouldn't say 'Cajun' like that, Mother. Sometime you might forget and do it when the Villacs or the Primeaux could hear you and you'd hurt their feelings terribly. They don't mind calling themselves Cajuns, but they don't like to have other people do it."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll try not to. But when you said you thought your Uncle Jonathan and Fleex Primeaux were something alike, you startled me so that—"

"I don't see why you should have been so startled. Fleex hasn't been to school much, I know, and I think he's sorry now, though he never says so. But his mother died and his father didn't realize how important school was. His mother would have. Fleex said she was a real lady, convent bred and everything. But she fell in love with his father and came out to live on the prairie with him and never regretted it, because they were so happy together."

"Who told you all this?"

"Fleex And Fleex knows all about plants and birds and animals and he's the best shot and sings better and plays the violin better than anyone else around here. I still think Fleex and Uncle Jonathan are something alike."

Both Brent and Mary had reason to feel satisfaction with their daughter's record at school. She made up for her late start with astonishing rapidity and was one of the youngest pupils in the graduating class. It was very generally taken for granted that at the exercises which, at Grand Coteau, were called "The Prizes" instead of Graduation, Lavinia Winslow would sing in the chorus, play the piano and carry off top honors in French

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and mathematics. On this time-honored occasion Lavinia's face and figure, the sheen of Lavinia's golden hair under her white lace veil, Lavinia's grace in marching and in kneeling, were treasured in the memories, not only of the religious and the pupils, but in those of all visiting relatives and friends.

But even though Lavinia had now nominally "settled down" at the farm, it seemed to Mary that the girl spent most of her time ranging the countryside, and one night she stayed out so late that Mary became seriously worried. When she finally heard the sound of voices on the porch, she rose and threw a robe around her. Then she went into the sitting room to wait until her daughter came in, her feeling of uneasiness assuaged, but her curiosity roused. One of the voices, of course, was Lavinia's. The other was Claude's.

"I said no," Lavinia declared at last. "If you keep on pestering me like this, I won't go out with you alone again. I'll stay with the crowd. Good night."

When the front door had opened and closed, Mary called softly to Lavinia. "It's very late, darling," she said. "I'd begun to be worried."

"There's no reason why you should have been. I'd have been home hours ago, if Claude hadn't been making such a nuisance of himself."

"A nuisance of himself?"

"Yes. He's bound and determined that I should get engaged to him. He's been harping and harping on it. This isn't the first time, either. I've told him that, if he keeps on this way, I won't go to any more dances with him."

"Darling, you know your father and I both like Claude very much. He's a fine boy. It's greatly to his credit that he's done so well at Acadia College and graduated with honors. Now I understand he's had a good job offered him at the new rice mill. His family and friends have every reason to be proud of him. But he must know you're too young to be engaged. I'll tell him so myself—or your father will."

"It won't do any good. He'll tell you lots of girls are *married*

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when they're younger than I am. It's true, too. But I don't want to be engaged to Claude. I like him a lot, I always have; I'm just not in the mood for getting engaged to him. . . . Do you mind awfully if I go to bed, Mother? I'm pretty tired. And I do hope you won't say anything to Father about this. Because nothing's going to come of it. And it would mean a lot more arguing, when I've had about all I can take."

"All right, darling. I won't say anything to your father—not now, anyway. He wasn't worried about you—he's fast asleep. And we'd better get some sleep, too. Perhaps we can talk about this tomorrow."

Mary turned this prospective conversation over in her mind many times during the remainder of the night and, the next day, took pains to create opportunities when Lavinia could talk with her confidentially. Lavinia did not improve any of them. She slept late, played the piano for hours, went for a horseback ride with her grandfather and, early in the evening, announced that she was going to her room to dress. This in itself was surprising, for Lavinia was singularly free from vanity, and changed casually and quickly from one kind of clothes to another, when she bothered to change at all. Her mother, who was working in her flower garden, looked up in astonishment.

"I thought you said you weren't going to any more dances for the present. And you were so tired—"

"I'm not tired any more, and what I said was that I wouldn't go to any more dances with *Claude*, if he kept on pestering me. I'm not going with Claude. I'm going with Fleex."

"Fleex! I thought he was away. I didn't know he was at home."

"He came home today. I happened to meet him while I was out riding. He asked me if I'd like to go into Crowley to a dance tonight and I said I would."

"Well," Mary said hesitantly. "Well . . . if you're going that far, you know I prefer to have you go in a group, and I'm afraid you'll be very late again."

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"I thought 'groups' just meant people I'd met later, not those I'd known from the beginning. . . . I probably shall be late. But there's nothing to be afraid of."

I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure, Mary kept saying to herself all the rest of the evening. She told herself, at the same time, that it was a very silly thing for her to be saying. She repeated this, both before Fleex appeared, driving the Primeaux' best buggy, and after he and Lavinia had gone off together. There was no protest in Lavinia's voice now, or any weariness, and she had never seemed in better spirits or looked so pretty. Fleex was apparently in very good spirits, too, and he was very neatly dressed, in a new dark suit. He certainly was a handsome boy—no, not a handsome boy any more, a handsome man. He was two years older than Claude, who was about four years older than Lavinia, and that made him—why, Fleex must be twenty-two or three. It was unbelievable, but it was true. He had been away so much, and time had been flying so fast, that Mary had not thought of him as a man before. But now she did. . . . She made some excuse to Brent about sewing that simply had to be finished and he went upstairs, unconcernedly, without her. It seemed an eternity before she heard the buggy drive into the outer yard again. Then she heard nothing else. She endured the silence as long as she could and at last she went quietly out on the porch.

Fleex and Lavinia were standing beside the buggy. They were not saying anything; they were merely looking at each other. In the bright moonlight, Mary could see them clearly, and what she saw made her believe that, in a minute, they would be in each other's arms. But they did not touch each other and they did not speak, even to say good night, before Lavinia turned and started to walk, alone, toward the house. Then, in that same moment, Fleex turned, too, and Mary saw not only his profile, as she had before, but his full face. In one dreadful flash, she understood. That was the way Jonathan Fant had looked, years before, when he had come upon Mary while

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she was sorting old papers, and told her that it was she he was in love with, and not her sister.

It was the next day that she reminded Brent, as casually as she could, that Lavinia was growing up.

Brent did not seem to be taking what she was saying to him very seriously. But in fact, he did not dismiss the matter of his daughter from his mind as completely as his manner indicated. When he came in to dinner, he observed Lavinia carefully. She was quieter than usual, but at the same time she gave an impression of restlessness, because she kept looking out of the window. He had not seen her anywhere around the yard or the barns in the course of the morning, so he asked her what she had been doing. She answered that since she got up, which was not long before dinnertime anyway, she had started to make herself a party dress of pink muslin. Didn't she have enough party dresses? Brent inquired casually. No, Lavinia said, not if she were going to a dance almost every night. Was that what she was planning to do? More or less. Didn't she think once or twice a week was enough? No, she didn't—everyone in the crowd went oftener than that. Well, as her father, he thought once or twice a week was plenty. Without making any direct response and asking, quite politely, if she might be excused, as she didn't want any dessert, Lavinia rose from the table and, after one more glance out of the window, walked over to the sewing machine. This, Brent now noticed for the first time, was covered with a froth of pink muslin. . . . When he came in from the fields, late in the afternoon, his daughter was sitting in the open doorway, wearing her new dress. He had never seen her look so pretty.

"Lavinia," he said, trying to speak sternly, "you were out last night and the night before and I told you—"

"I know, Father. But I'd already planned to go to this dance. I didn't think you meant me to break an engagement."

"Isn't that rather a solemn way of putting it? Just because

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you have some sort of vague arrangement with another kid that he'll show up here, to take you to a dance."

The Villacs' best buggy rounded the turn in the road which led past the grove, the outbuildings and the vegetable garden. It was still fairly distant from the house. But Lavinia leaped up with a speed which suggested that she might be going out to meet it—exactly, Brent suddenly remembered, as Mary had been wont to rush out to meet him when he was courting her.

"There's Fleex now!" Lavinia cried joyously and dashed past her father. Then she stopped as suddenly as she had risen, and stood staring ahead of her as if she could not believe her eyes.

It was not Fleex who was driving the buggy. It was Claude.

"But where *is* he?"

"I don't know, Lavinia. None of us knows. He's always come and gone without warning—you ought to remember that. We didn't expect him when he came yesterday morning. We didn't expect him to leave this morning, either. But he's gone."

"Well then, he'll be back. Any minute. It's early yet. You might have waited a little longer."

"Lavinia, I don't think he's coming back. Not for a long while anyway. All his clothes are gone this time. And his fishing tackle and his rifle."

Lavinia continued to stand beside the buggy and to stare unbelievably at Claude. "All right," she said at last. "If that's the case, I won't be going out to dances, when Father doesn't approve. He thinks I shouldn't go more than twice a week and I've been twice this week already—night before last with you and last night with Fleex. Good-by, Claude."

She turned abruptly and walked back toward the house. Claude, who had got out of the buggy, and Brent, who was still standing in the doorway, spoke simultaneously.

"But, Lavinia, I've come to take you to the dance. You meant to go one more time this week anyway. You were all ready to go with Fleex. I don't see—"

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"As long as Claude is here, Lavinia, why don't you go with him? I agree with him that, under the circumstances—"

"You said, just a little while ago, that it was silly for me 'to talk about breaking engagements' when all I had was 'some vague arrangement with a kid my own age.' I had a definite engagement with Fleex, who's quite a lot older than I am, by the way; but I didn't have even a vague arrangement with Claude. I won't have any chance of pleasing you, Father, if you keep changing your mind like this."

She did not actually push past him, because she was so slim that this was not necessary, in order for her to glide quickly and quietly into the house. But the full fresh muslin of her pink skirt brushed against Brent's knees as she went through the door, and he caught a whiff of some fresh, delicate fragrance as she disappeared. He looked helplessly toward the miserable boy standing by the buggy.

"I'm sorry, Claude," he said as kindly as he knew how. "Of course I don't object to having Lavinia go out with you. I just thought she was overdoing things a little, if she tried to take in a dance every night. I'm afraid she's given you a wrong impression—that somehow, she's got a wrong impression herself. In fact, she seems very upset."

"I'm afraid I helped upset her," Claude confessed unhappily. "You see, Mr. Winslow, I'd like very much to be engaged to Lavinia—that is, to have it understood that someday she and I would be engaged. I've kept telling her so, and I'm afraid I've done it too often—that she's grown tired of hearing it. I haven't meant to annoy her, only to make her understand. I care a lot and—" He stopped to clear his throat. "I wouldn't have done it if I thought it would upset her."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have, Claude," Brent said, still speaking very kindly. "And I want you to know that neither Mrs. Winslow nor I would have put any obstacles in your way—that is, when the proper time came. But you and Lavinia are both very young."

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"I'm four years older than she is," Claude said awkwardly. "But thanks a lot for saying you don't object. I mean, that you don't believe you'd have any objections to our getting engaged by-and-by. I won't come over again for a few days. Perhaps that'll give Lavinia a chance to stop being so upset. That is, I won't come unless we hear something from Fleex. If we do, I'll let her know right away. Because I can't help thinking, Mr. Winslow, that another reason she's upset is because Fleex has gone off without telling her about it."

When Brent described this scene to Mary, she agreed with him that Claude had behaved very well and that Lavinia had behaved very badly. She did not mention that she also agreed with Claude's surmise about the main reason for Lavinia's upset.

That it really was heartbreak and not merely disappointment or hurt pride her mother felt increasingly sure. For a few days Lavinia kept close to the house, and her mother was aware that she was still watching and waiting for Fleex, hoping against hope that he would reappear. Then Lavinia herself vanished early one morning, and late in the afternoon when she still had not come home, Jim Garland, sensing Mary's anxiety, offered to ride over to the Primeaux' place, and bring Lavinia back with him.

"What makes you think she's there?" Mary asked quickly.

"I guess I worded that wrong. I don't think she's there. But I think Claude will know where to find her. . . . Don't you remember, Mary," he went on in answer to his daughter's questioning look, "that the three of them—Fleex and Claude and Lavinia, I mean—used to have a hide-out in the swamp? All youngsters like to have secrets, whether they keep them or not, which they don't, usually. But this was one they did keep—none of us ever discovered where that hide-out was, though we all tried to, at one time or another. I think that's where Lavinia's gone—hoping to find Fleex. Of course he isn't there—if he were, Claude would have found him already. It would have

occurred to him, right away, to look. Then he'd have come back and let us know. Now he'll track down Lavinia for us—you'll see. Of course I won't be so crude as to suggest anything of the sort. I'll just go over to pay a friendly visit, and after a while I'll ask if Lavinia is anywhere around and say that, if she is, she and I might ride home together. As a matter of fact, I don't need any excuse for a visit. There's a perfectly logical reason for one, quite aside from Lavinia's absence. Anne Villac is far from well these days. Didn't you know?"

Mary did know. The last time Dr. Mouton had been to the Winslows for a social call, he had just come from a professional visit to the Primeaux. Anne Villac was going the way of many another Cajun woman whom he had seen—apparently as strong as a horse and then, having worked like one for half a century or more, meanwhile taking yearly childbirth in her stride, had suddenly reached the end of her rope—well, his similes were getting a little mixed, but Mrs. Winslow would know what he meant. It was just as well that Mezalee had been persuaded to put off her project of becoming a nun, and that she had not married the way her sister Marcelite had. She was needed at home, to take up the burden which her ailing aunt was, perforce, laying down. . . .

Jim Garland recalled all this to his daughter before he rode off for the neighborly visit and, while he was gone, Mary sat thinking. Brent was staying in the fields very late, these summer evenings, while the light lasted, so she was alone. But long before she expected him, her father returned.

"You'll be glad to know that Anne doesn't seem any worse," he said. "But it's just as I thought: Lavinia wasn't there and Claude said he believed he knew where he could find her. He set out right away and he'll bring her back safe and sound, Mary. Listen! I think that must be Claude and Lavinia now!"

Unquestionably, there was a sound of approaching hoofs, mingled with that of distant voices. Presently, both sounds died away. Jim Garland and his daughter sat looking at each other in silence, waiting for the next sound. It did not come for some

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minutes. Then the door opened and Lavinia appeared in its embrasure—alone. She was more or less disheveled and obviously very tired; but both her dishevelment and her weariness were overshadowed by her anger.

"I hope the next time I feel like getting off by myself you won't think it's necessary to send Claude Villac after me," she said. "Anyway, I think I've made it clear to him that, if you try to, and he comes, I'll never speak to him again. Claude's gone home now and Father's putting my horse away for me. He happened to meet us out by the gate and he said he could see I'd had a hard ride. He's right, in more ways than one. If you don't mind, I'm going straight to bed. I don't want any supper."

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning Lavinia appeared at the breakfast table, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Lavinia did not seem discontented when she was at home, and she was never actually rude or unkind to Claude a second time; eventually, she went out with him on the same basis that she did with other young men who lived in and near Crowley. But she made a great many visits, and finally she announced that she would like very much to go to New Orleans and continue her education.

This announcement was almost as much of a shock to Mary as it was to Brent. "But, Lavinia, you've graduated already," she said in a bewildered way.

"At Grand Coteau. I'd like to do more advanced work, especially in music. I've been to the opera two or three times, when it's come to St. Martinville. I'd like to go regularly, all through the season. And study with a really good teacher—perhaps one of the members of the orchestra."

"But, Lavinia, where would you *live*? We haven't any family in New Orleans, any friends even. And I'm not sure that those people who are connected with the opera are just—I mean, I'm afraid—"

"All right. That's what I'd really like to do, but if you'd be any easier, I'd settle for the next best thing. That new college for girls, Sophie Newcomb, makes special arrangements for students to board with private families. I wouldn't even have to be a regular student—I mean, one taking the full curriculum—if you didn't want me to. I could just take one or more special courses.

Mary was silent a moment. Of course Brent could well afford to send Lavinia to New Orleans; he was doing better and better

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every year. "I'll speak to your father," she said presently. "But I'm almost sure what his reaction will be. I'm almost sure he won't approve. And I don't, either, darling. It seems to us—"

"It seems to you now that I'd be happier if I got married. Evidently parents are always sure that the opposite of what their children want to do is best for them. When I felt like going to dances, you and Father didn't want me to. Now that I don't care whether I do or not, you'd like to have me, provided I went with just the right person, of course, just the kind of man you'd choose for me—not the kind I'd choose for myself."

She spoke with such bitterness that Mary was increasingly disturbed. Dealing with a grown daughter, she decided, was infinitely harder than dealing with a husband or a father; the problems posed by one slim, pretty girl were more difficult to solve than any of those presented by farming or pioneering. When Brent stubbornly refused to so much as discuss the project Lavinia had broached, and even Jim Garland, for once, had no solution to offer, Mary tried to believe the question was closed, only to find herself thwarted. Support for Lavinia came from almost the last quarter where her distracted mother would have expected to find it.

She had begun to make a point of going to see Anne Villac, at least once a week, and more often than not, Anne was in bed. The dreadful word "cancer" was never spoken between them, but its import now loomed ominously in their lives. Nonetheless, Anne joked about being lazy, and she discussed Lavinia's attitude as lightheartedly as she did everything else.

"Like I tol' you when I first come on the prairie, me," she informed Mary, "you, worry-worry-worry, 'bout that one account she the onlies' one you got, stead of havin' maybe a dozen to divide it up so each of them, yes, get a li'l bit fo' herself, her."

"Wouldn't you worry if one of your girls wanted to go streaking off to a big city?"

"Not me, no. All I got to do is tell my relations, them. They would take care of her good, yes."

"But I haven't got any relations in New Orleans."

"That's too bad, yes. Me an' Ursin, we got plenty-plenty relations, us, the same relations as Phares, him. But I got to tell you, me, we got plenty-plenty other relations, too. Adeline's relations."

"Adeline's?"

"Sho', you don't know 'bout Adeline? She Phares' *defint* wife, her."

"I suppose I must have known her name was Adeline. But I'd forgotten. She died before I came here, you know."

"Yes, sho'," Anne said again. "That was why we come, me an' Ursin an' the children. But you heard 'bout Adeline, didn' you?"

Mary hesitated. Now that she was reminded, she recalled that Lavinia had said Fleex's mother was a "real lady," and that she had broken loose from her background and come to live on the prairie.

"Well, she had plenty-plenty relations in New Orleans, too, her. All you got to do is write to them, tell them you an' Mr. Winslow is our friends, they fix everything up for Lavinia."

Again Mary hesitated. "Are they close relations?" she inquired, after a pause.

"Close enough. Why you ask?"

"I couldn't help thinking that if they were really close they might—well, they might have heard from Fleex."

"I got to tell you frankly, me, I don' know whether they ever heard from Fleex, them, or not," Anne said. "I got to say, they ain't all that close, so they'd be likely to hear. Fleex's *gran'père* an' his *gran'mère* is both dead since long-long ago, an' his po' *maman* was an only child, without no brothers or sisters, her, jus' like you' Lavinia. But w'at I really got to say, me, is how glad I am, yes, you at last open you' mouth to me 'bout Fleex. Fo' I don' know how long, I been hopin', me, you would say something, account it's such a pity Fleex went away, him."

"Yes, it is. Especially the way he did."

"That ain't w'at I been studyin' on, me, no. W'at I been thinkin' 'bout is Lavinia; thinkin' an' thinkin', and feelin' so

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sorry, yes, she never married with Fleex, her, an' be happy like Adeline done when she marry with Phares, her."

"But, Anne—"

"Me, I already know real good every word you fixin' to say, yes, so you don' got to say nothin' 'bout it. W'at I got in my min' was the letter she fin' in that li'l hidin' place they got when she go there, her, fo' to look fo' Fleex. When Claude found Lavinia, him, she was still a-readin' that letter Fleex wrote her. Claude never read the letter, no, account it wasn't wrote to him, but Lavinia, she tol' him w'at it said in the letter. I expect, me, she had to tell somebody, or else she'd bus' in two pieces maybe. Fleex wrote how she got to forget all about him, yes, an' how he's goin' take an' go 'way on some ship, him, without he even tells her good-by, account if he tries to tell her he won't be able to leave, no, not never. Then he say he love her plenty-plenty, but he was jus' a no-'count, ig'rant swamps Cajun, him, an' she was a fine lady, educate in Gran' Coteau an' all. Maybe Lavinia will get married anyway, after a while, her, maybe even to Claude. I hope so, me. I would want Lavinia for my daughter. But gettin' married with Claude won't count for her, not never, no, like gettin' married with Fleex. So you jus' as well let Lavinia go to New Orleans, yes."

A week or so after this conversation took place, Phares trudged over to the Winslows' farm for one of his periodic visits and informed his hosts, as they sat drinking coffee in the cluttered sitting room, that he had been called to New Orleans on business and that Annette had "worried" him until he had agreed to take her along.

"Mezalee the one belongs to be goin', her," he said. "Clisson an' Haydee Labadie, where we goin' stay by their house, us, is Adeline's relations, so Mezalee is the one they blood kin to. Only Mezalee won't leave Anne, no, so Annette goin' have this here fine trip. W'at I'm really tryin' to say, is how me an' Annette would be mighty glad, us, if you let Lavinia come along. W'at you say, *hein*? I got to come home in one day,

mebbe two, an' then go back to town again to finish up with business. So I got the idee, me, that if them young girls is havin' a big-big time in N'Yawl'ns, an' the Labadies invites them to stay, why not let them have the chance, an' I would bring them back, me, nex' time when I go down on the train."

"Well," Brent said. "Well—what do you think, Mary?"

"I think it would be a fine outing for the girls, just as Phares said," Mary answered quietly. Nothing about her manner indicated what else she was thinking: that this business that had come up was too opportune to be wholly accidental.

"My *defint* wife's papa an' *maman* is both dead now, them," Phares told the Winslows. "They live these Labadie relations all together in one *p'tite maisonette*. Them's a brother an' sister, we goin' visit with, us. Clisson an' Haydee Labadie ain't never marry with nobody. They gettin' old, an' it must be they got to thinking', them, how nobody don' know w'at's goin' to happen with their nice *p'tite maisonette*, an' all those prit-tee things they got in there, them. Who goin' get all that when Clisson an' Haydee comes to die? Strangers mebbe? Anyway, Clisson he set hisself down to write, him, an' say he wants we should talk 'bout the property, us. I tell you frankly, me, it wouldn't surprise me the firs' li'l bit, no, if he an' his sister Haydee ain't made up they min's to leave it to my children, or at least to one of them. If it got to be one, I want it should be Mezalee. Clement, he goin' get my share off the farm; me an' Ursin got our understandings on that, us, for the longes'. Marcelite got not even one thing to worry her, no, at least not 'bout money. That Bazinet boy she got married with is doin' plenny good, him. I got to admit it. He's doin' plenny better'n I ever expect' he would, me. An' Fleex—"Phares stopped and, for the third time, shook his head. "No use to even talk 'bout leavin' nothin' to him, no, when we got no idee, us, where he is at. Tha's a bad one, him, even if he is my son. But Mezalee, her—"

"Mezalee's a saint on earth," Lavinia said quickly. "But what would she do with a nice little house and all the pretty things in it? She won't even go and see them."

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"I got to admit you' right 'bout that, yes. But mebbe it should go to all four, anyway. I got to admit, me, they good Cath'lic people w'at wants to do the right things, yes, an' they boun' to have something besides the *maisonette*, too. They both been teachin' music fo' the longes', them. . . . You got some trouble with you' lungs mebbe, Mary? I don' like to hear nobody coughin' like that, me. You got a right to take care of it real good, yes."

"A cake crumb went down the wrong way, that's all," Mary said, recovering her speech. "When are you starting, Phares?"

"In the letter he talks like he wants me to come soon-soon," he said thoughtfully. "Mebbe nex' week, yes."

"*Next week!*" Lavinia cried. "Why, Mr. Primeaux, don't you think you ought to start tomorrow?"

"Lavinia, Mr. Primeaux knows when he ought to start. He has the farm to think of, too."

"There isn't much work on a farm in January. And I'm sure—I'm absolutely positive—that those Labadies are thinking of willing their property to someone in the Primeaux family. I don't believe there's a moment to lose."

Simultaneously, Brent and Mary reproved Lavinia. But Phares did nothing of the sort. He eyed her with increasing attention and respect. "Lavinia got it right, her," he said. "Not tomorrow, no. I wouldn't have no chance, me, to get ready by no tomorrow. But the day after. . . ."

Not since the afternoon when Lavinia had made herself a frilly pink dress and piled her golden hair high on her head, singing as she did so, while she prepared to go dancing with Fleex, had Mary seen her daughter so happy as on the eve of her departure.

The Labadies' little house on the Rue de Quartiers in New Orleans was unlike any place Lavinia had ever seen before and, from the moment she entered the side door, which led directly from the alleyway into the drawing room, she was charmed. The little house—the Labadies called it their *maisonette*—was

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two rooms wide and two rooms deep; and Clisson Labadie explained to Lavinia, in his gentle, quavering voice, that it was made up of twin houses that had been thrown together, so that, originally, each had been only one room wide though each had had its *cabinet* over the wine cellar, its loggia at the rear, and its kitchen and slave quarters on the farther side of the patio. The *cabinet*, Lavinia discovered, was actually an extra bedroom, a tiny one, reached from the big one by a short flight of stairs, but inaccessible in any other way. The one thus connected with Mlle Labadie's room was where she and Annette were to sleep.

M. Clisson and Mlle Haydee resembled each other closely; both spoke English correctly, but slowly, and with a pronounced accent, and seemed delighted when Lavinia said, rather shyly, that she understood French and that, if they would rather talk in that language. . . .

The Labadies still retained the small *loge grillée* at the opera which their dear parents had had before them. Were the young ladies interested in music? Lavinia very greatly so? Why, that was splendid, she must certainly take advantage of the cultural opportunities afforded by this visit! And even if Annette did not care so much for the cultural side of things, she—and Lavinia, too, for that matter—would enjoy the Carnival Balls. It was too bad they had missed the Twelfth Night Revels, and by so narrow a margin, too! But fortunately there were other balls still ahead—Momus and Proteus, of course and, on Mardi Gras, Rex. . . .

"You forget, Mlle Haydee, these young girls ain't goin' to stay but a few days, them. You're talkin' like they was goin' to impose on you all winter."

"Impose? Impose did you say, Phares? Never! It would be our pleasure and our privilege to have them remain as long as we can keep them contented. *Bien entendu*, you will feel you should return to your farm when *les affaires* have had your attention. But these sweet children—what *affaires* can there be which will take them back to the prairie?"

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None, of course, Lavinia said to herself. Miraculously, she had managed to get to New Orleans. Now she would manage to stay here until she found the man she sought. Sooner or later, the ship which had borne him away would bring him back. She would study hard, she would practice faithfully, she would scrupulously observe the proprieties. But all the time she would be waiting for Fleex.

A letter, received by Lavinia's parents a few days later, disclosed a certain amount of what was on her mind: perhaps her parents did not know, Lavinia wrote them, that Annette would be quite ready to go home after a week or ten days. Pierre Peret, that boy from Lafayette who was working in the new bank at Crowley, had been making eyes at Annette for quite a while; she thought he would suggest buying the *alliance* almost any time now. As for Lavinia, she hoped very much that her parents would let her stay on with the Labadies, who were cordially urging her to do so. Mlle Haydee was writing by the next mail—there were so many pupils scheduled for that day she hadn't been able to catch this one—and she would invite the elder Winslows to come and spend a day or two at the *maisonette*. Lavinia hoped her father and mother would let her stay on at least that much longer. Nothing needed to be definitely decided until then.

Mary read the letter first and then handed it to Brent. He went through it twice, slowly, before he looked up and gave it back to her.

"You think we ought to let her stay, don't you, Mary?"

"Yes, I do. That is, I think we ought to accept this invitation, and if everything looks all right to us. . . ."

"Very well. If that's the way you feel about it, I'm willing to give my provisional consent."

Everything not only looked "all right," but almost ideal. Nothing that Lavinia had written about the Labadies, the *maisonette* and the advantages which both offered to their

daughter seemed in the least exaggerated to either Brent or Mary. It was agreed that Lavinia should make her headquarters with the Labadies until after Commencement in June. Brent put in a good word for Claude: this was the slack season at the rice mill; the boy might be able to get down to New Orleans once in a while. Would M. Clisson and Mlle Haydee be willing to have him come to see Lavinia occasionally? There was no engagement, not even a definite prospect of one, though it was increasingly evident that, in the case of Annette, matters were different. But Claude was a declared suitor and, as far as Lavinia's parents were concerned, an acceptable one. In fact, they rather hoped that, in time, he might succeed in diverting her thoughts from one who had been less acceptable and whom, they were afraid, she had never wholly dismissed from her mind. Of course, both Labadies hastened to assure the Winslows; Claude would be welcome at any time; he could sleep in the loft over M. Clisson's *bureau*. In fact, it had been occupied every now and then by his cousin Fleex. That, *bien entendu*, was before Fleex had behaved so badly and run off to sea; it was in the days when he had come in from the prairie for an occasional brief visit in New Orleans. He had always appeared unannounced and uninvited, but the Labadies had made him welcome for the sake of his dead mother and his dead grandparents, God rest their souls! Even then, his character and his conduct had left much to be desired, however. He was unpredictable, he was unreasonable, he was unreliable. Moreover, he was given to sudden outbursts of anger and had a bad name in the Quarter because of the quarrels in which he had figured publicly, while still a young boy. In short, the Labadies had put up with a good deal from Fleex. Now that he had brought real disgrace on the family, naturally he could no longer be received at the *maisonette*. The Winslows would understand. . . .

They did understand and they understood also that the Labadies had divined the identity of Lavinia's unacceptable suitor. Nothing more was said on the subject. Mary went back to her flowers and Brent to his experiments, convinced that

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they were leaving their daughter in good hands. It had not occurred to them to question Mignon, the Labadies' colored servant; still less did it occur to them that Lavinia might have done exactly this.

"Well, you promises not to tell M'iz Haydee nare word an' I tell you," Mignon had cautioned Lavinia. "Mist' Fleex he been here all right. He been here lots. I don't mean he been to the house, no, like he used to come. But he come to N'Yawlins plenny times, account the boat he on come plenny times."

"Which boat is it?"

"One 'em bananny boats that make a roun' trip to some heathing bananny land ev'y three-fo' weeks. But he never stay here no longer'n it take to get shed of the banannies they brings up the river."

"You mean he's a sailor?"

"Fiah'mun, M'iz Viney. Lease-a-ways, 'at's what 'ey tell me."

"Who tells you?"

Mignon's features set themselves in stubborn lines.

"'Ey tells me. Peoples tells me," she said with an air of finality. "'Ey talks 'bout Mist' Fleex 'bout him all the time fightin' when he got a few 'em drinks in him. He the fightines' gemman when he come ashore an' get to drinkin'! I mean!"

"Yes," Lavinia agreed slowly, and almost absently, "he would be."

Because she was so confident that, sooner or later, she would have news of Fleex, and that this news would be the prelude to their reunion, Lavinia was able to await these tidings without obvious impatience and, for the most part, without undue restlessness of spirit. She really enjoyed her music lessons with Mile Haydee, in which she made rapid progress, and her courses at college, where she quickly acquired new friends; and at the operas she attended, her pleasurable excitement sometimes rose to such a pitch, while watching the ill-starred lovers on the stage and listening to their impassioned arias, that she was able to forget, momentarily, that she had been crossed in love herself. It was only afterward, when the last ardent duet had been

sung and the storm of applause had died down, that she remembered again, with a sudden stab of longing and pain. On such nights she lay for a long while sleepless, rebellious at the solitude of the *cabinet* which at first had seemed so lovely to her and yearning to be with Fleex, even if they had no other shelter for their love than the little hideout they had built, as children, in the swampland.

If there had been someone in whom she could confide, these interludes of rebellion and yearning would not have seemed so unbearable; but, of necessity, they were as secret as they were searing. However, she did not allow them to affect her visibly and she kept all the promises she had made: she studied hard, she practiced faithfully, she scrupulously observed all the proprieties.

Both M. Clisson and Mlle Haydee were delighted with Lavinia; they told each other that surely *le bon Dieu* must have had a hand in bringing this lovely young girl to brighten the *maisonette* in their old age; it was the compensation He was giving them for their own childlessness. They glowed with pride over the good marks that she received at Sophie Newcomb; they gave little soirées so that she could play to their relatives; they drew back the grille of their loge at the opera for the first time in many years, so that their acquaintances would realize they were again welcome to drop in between acts, and so that everyone in the audience would have a chance to admire the fresh beauty and modest bearing of the Labadies' protégée. When Claude came to visit, they made him welcome and created opportunities for him to see Lavinia alone. Normally, they would have felt that closer chaperonage was indicated; but with such a decorous young girl, such a correct young man, surely there was no need for constant surveillance. . . . Claude did his best to improve these opportunities, but he did not make much progress.

Lavinia enjoyed the Proteus Ball and she was thrilled with masking on Mardi Gras and the Rex Ball. But the hush of Lent followed the hubbub of Carnival. Commencement brought the

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fourth quarter at Sophie Newcomb to a close and still she had heard nothing from Fleex.

There was no help for it. Lavinia must go home, confessing defeat to herself, if to no one else. She must stave off Claude's more and more urgent importunities, she must be a dutiful daughter to the parents who had given her so much and to whom, so far, she had given little in return. For the first time, as she watched her father planting the rows of rice in his experimental garden under the hot sun, or bending over his measuring board in the long monotonous evenings, she recognized a kinship with him and his soul's sincere desire which she had not felt before. He also was waiting and searching; to him, as to her, the wait seemed endless, the search vain. With the recognition came a new tenderness and a new tie. But neither sufficed to make her feel she could confide in him or to still the clamor in her heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Annette's romance was satisfactory to her family. Everything about it progressed in the most approved way. Pierre Peret's father made a formal Saturday afternoon call on the Villacs, in the course of which he outlined, without undue reserve, the fine qualities and glowing prospects of his son, and paid ponderous compliments to Annette. The visit was not unexpected, so proper preparations had been made for a company supper, at which Pierre and Annette were placed side by side and, at the end of the evening, he presented her with a picture of himself. Her blushing acceptance of this was regarded as a sign that she considered herself betrothed to him. A date for the wedding was discussed and by the time coffee and cake made their appearance, July was decided upon as a propitious time.

Anne Villac had admonished the members of her family, both individually and collectively, that they were not to talk to the Perets about the state of her health and they respected her wishes. They said nothing to indicate that they realized the almost superhuman effort she was making, or that they feared she might collapse before the long-drawn-out festivities were finally over. Ursin, whose own fears on that score were more acute, watched over her with pride in her fortitude and dread of its consequences; but though she made no further effort to stay up or even to get up after the wedding, it was not until weeks later that she said anything which could be interpreted as an admission of pain and increasing weakness.

"I don' see how I'm goin' to get to Lacombe for *Toussaint*," she finally told him. "I been studyin' on it an' I just know I can't make it. You'll have to go without me, *cher*."

"If you ain't goin', I ain't goin', either," Ursin said stub-

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bornly. "I ain't leavin' you, when you're all that sick, not for *Toussaint* nor either nothin' else."

"Ursin, we ain't never missed once, us, all these years. You know, Ursin, I ain't thinkin' just about my people's graves no mo' I'm thinkin' 'bout my own, too."

"Now, *chère*—" he began, the sharpness all gone from his voice. Anne interrupted him again.

"It don't help none, not no mo', no, to be pretendin', Ursin. Not between you an' me, leastways. To other people, we got to keep on pretendin'. I got to give you right on that, yes. But husban' an' wife, that's different. So: the two of us, you an' me, knows real good I ain't got much mo' time to live, me, an' even if we ain't talked too much about it biffa' now, you bound to know I want to be buried with my own people."

"Yes, I know, Anne."

He took her hand and, for a few minutes, they both sat silent. Then Ursin cleared his throat and made a hesitant suggestion: if Anne did not think their family relations at Slidell could look after the family lot to suit her, on *Toussaint*, would she let Claude do it? He would have to do these things when they were both dead and gone. Perhaps it would be just as well if he began now.

Anne lay back on her pillows pondering his suggestion. "You suppose he could get off from the mill, him?"

"Positive, I guarantee you, me! Not to go to some dance, maybe, no, or like that. I know they says Tibier, the manager, is a slave driver, him, an' he sure works his men hard, hard. But he is also the kind of man what understands how you feel, yes, if somebody explains. An' Claude could easy do that. Claude got a pleasant way to speak, him."

"That pleasant speakin' never got him all that far with Lavinia."

"You ain't grievin' on that, no, are you, Anne?"

"Sho' I am. Claude's a one-girl boy, him. I want to see him married an' happy like he got a right to be."

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She did not add, "before I die," but Ursin knew what was in her mind. It was in his mind, too.

When Ursin was satisfied that Anne was sleeping, he went out into the yard. Claude, who rode back and forth to the mill every day, had just unsaddled his horse and was coming toward the house. His father stopped him.

"Your *maman* ain't feelin' so good," he said. "No, don' go in right now. I think she's fixin' to get a little nap. But she's been talkin' to me 'bout *Toussaint*. She say she ain't goin' be able to go to Lacombe this year, her, no, an' I tell you frankly, me, I ain't about to leave her an' go no place without her. Not me. So you got to go, Claude, an' you got to tell Tibier right away, him, how you got to be away three days, startin' October 30th."

"Of course, I'll go if that's what you and *Maman* want. And I'll tell Tibier right away. He won't be too glad, I expect—that's one busy time at the mill. But never mind. I'll go anyway." Claude spoke with the confidence of one who was making good at his job and who knew he would be hard to replace. "Who's going with me?"

"I expect you got to go alone by you'self, yes. Annette can't leave her husban', not right after they got married, an' the others is all too young, them, to help an', anyway, they in school, too."

"Yes, that's so. Well, I sort of hate to go alone, but I guess there's no help for it."

He's thinking what a grand thing it would be if Lavinia would go with him, Ursin said to himself. *I hope he doesn't tell her that though—it would just give her another chance to turn him down and she's done that half a dozen times already. But I suppose he will, the young fool. I suppose he'll go right on asking for sorrow. . . .*

Ursin was right in one respect: the young fool did go right on asking for sorrow. But in another respect, he was wrong. Lavinia did not turn Claude down. She said she would be glad to go to Lacombe with him.

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He was almost stunned by the readiness of her answer. The request had represented a forlorn hope, based not only on her sympathy for his mother or her friendship for him, but on her appreciation of the unusual, the picturesque and the spectacular, whether the form it took was grave or gay.

There was nothing in Crowley which even remotely resembled the celebration of *Toussaint* at Lacombe; as far as that went, there was nothing like it even in New Orleans. Of course Lavinia knew about *Toussaint* in Lacombe: she had heard the Villacs and the Primeaux talk about it for years, both before and after the annual pilgrimages made by Ursin and Anne. But these conversations had been incidental; they had never been prompted by a purpose. Now, as Claude talked about the glow of sunset behind the pine trees, and the eerie effect of mystery, created by the oncoming dusk, and the first intermittent glimmerings of light, widening to brilliancy, in the dark forest, he dwelt on details never mentioned before and became preternaturally eloquent in his descriptions. But he did not and could not believe that anything he said would really be effective, when Lavinia interrupted him.

"I'd like very much to go," she said simply.

"*You would!*"

"Yes. I've always wanted to, ever since I first heard about it. But you never asked me before."

He stared at her, too astonished to speak. Here was something Lavinia had wanted to do for years, something that he could have made it possible for her to do, and he had never even thought of such a thing, all through his own stupidity.

"Of course, I've an added reason for wanting to go now," she went on. "Naturally, your mother would feel badly to have you go alone and there doesn't seem to be anyone else who could go with you. I'm going back to New Orleans in a few weeks and—"

"*You're going back to New Orleans!*"

"Yes. Mlle Haydee has invited me to come and stay at the *maisonette* again and go on with my lessons. You could come to

the Labadies'—I'm sure they'd be delighted to have you again—and spend the night. Then we could take a morning train for Slidell—there is a morning train, isn't there?—and have dinner with your family there before we went on to Lacombe. What's their name? Bachemin? Well, the Bachemins would be glad to have us for dinner, wouldn't they? And to have us spend the night, too? And I suppose they'd lend us a horse and buggy to go to Lacombe?"

"Of course," Claude said, over and over again, in answer to her questions. He could not find the words to say anything else.

The following weeks were the happiest of Claude's life; even his mother's decreasing strength and increasing pain made little impression on him, partly because Anne saw to it that he was, as far as possible, kept unaware of both; and partly because his absorption in Lavinia crowded everything else from his consciousness. He managed to see Lavinia, two or three times a week, in the evening, and Sundays he was free to spend wholly with her. All through the golden weather of early autumn, they went on outings together.

On October 30th Claude arrived in New Orleans in time to take Lavinia out to dinner at Antoine's. The next morning, he rose and went to Mass and Communion. When he returned to take her to the train, there was a new quality in the sense of exaltation which had pervaded his being ever since she had agreed to make the pilgrimage with him.

They reached the home of his maternal uncle Cénas Bachemin in comfortable time for the ample dinner that had been provided for them. The Bachemins had already been over to Lacombe, they assured Claude; he would find everything in order at the family lot—ground cleared, tombs whitewashed, candles in place. They would not go again that evening; but the buggy would be brought around at four—why, it was almost that now! They were sure Claude could manage all right without them.

The sun was still fairly high in the heavens when the buggy was brought around. Without questioning him, Lavinia allowed

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Claude to help her into it; but when, almost immediately after starting, he took an abrupt right-angle turn in the road and headed toward Lacombe, she looked at him inquiringly.

"I thought you said the grave lighting didn't start until dark."

"Just dark, not good dark. We'd best start now if we aim to see the beginning. And anyway, I thought you seemed interested when I told you that the sunsets here are kind of special when you see them through the pines. But I don't need to tell you they don't last long."

For a few moments, they jogged along in silence. Then Lavinia slipped her arm through Claude's and drew a little closer. "There it is! The lovely light you told me about! Oh, Claude, it is beautiful—that crimson sky behind those dark pines. I'm glad we came!"

"Yes," he said, "we're going to see lots of other things, too. We'll see groups of people starting for the cemeteries any moment now, walking along the road and carrying their candles and their flowers."

He had hardly finished speaking when just such a group came into view around a bend.

The crimson light was fading with its accustomed swiftness, but it was not quite gone, even yet; and above the pale rose which still lingered after the radiant glow, a few stars had appeared, and a young moon was swinging up into the calm sky as this darkened from pale turquoise to deep sapphire. Against these celestial splendors, the pines stood out with increasing majesty. It was very still. Only the quiet tread of the marching people and the creaking of the buggy penetrated the silence. The marchers did not speak to each other, except in whispers. When Lavinia spoke again, unconsciously she whispered, too. "Are you sure we're on the right road?"

"We must be. If those people ahead of us didn't know this led to a cemetery, they wouldn't be taking it. I think this is about as far as we can go in the buggy. I'm going to turn it out of the road a little, if I can, and hitch Mac to a tree. Wait a second, and I'll help you down."

She did not decline his proffered help, as she often had in

the past. He knew well enough that she did not need it. He realized that she was not thinking of him at all, just then. She was looking back, over the rough road, where, sure enough, another group was now advancing. Then she turned toward the clearing and, after gazing at it in silence for a moment, walked slowly toward it, wonderment in her face.

The great square, surrounded on every side by tall trees, had suddenly opened up before her. A few tombs, freshly white-washed, rose starkly above the bare ground; but these were the exception. For the most part, the woodland cemetery embraced only graves, laid out in neat rows with narrow aisles between the rows, each grave encased in a low white wooden frame and outlined with candles, nearly all of which were already burning brightly. The people who had entered the enclosure while Claude was hitching his horse had gone rapidly from grave to grave, illuminating the ones for which they were responsible, they also placed great clusters of flowers. By and large, the candle lighting and flower laying were done in silence and it was not until they were back in the buggy, jolting over the rough road again, that Lavinia spoke. "Are we going to any more cemeteries like that one?"

He hesitated. "Just as you say. The larger ones are all more or less alike. Of course, there are a lot of little cemeteries, too, where just one family is buried. But there's a good deal of sameness to those, too. I think when you've been to ours—"

"Shouldn't we have gone there first? After all, that was the one we came on purpose to visit!"

"I know. But I wanted to keep that for the last. There won't be any crowds now. Just you and me. I wanted it that way at the end, after the sun had gone down and it wasn't first evening any more. Night's different from sunset and dusk. I wanted to be alone with you and my people when night came on."

"I think I see what you mean."

Again they drove on without speaking to each other and this time the silence was longer. At last, Claude slowed down by the side of the road.

"There it is, a few hundred feet back."

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Lavinia followed the general direction of his gaze. At first, she could see nothing except a blur of radiance and something large and white looming up in the midst of darkness. Then she was aware of a huge white tomb, brilliantly illuminated, and a low, lighted rectangle, which must mark a grave, on either side of it. Beyond one of these rectangles rose a tall white cross and all were encircled by the overhanging branches of pine trees. Above them the moon and stars shone brightly in a sky which was now as black and smooth as onyx.

"It's very beautiful," Lavinia said softly.

There was enough light now, from the luminous sky, for him to see her expression, and he could not doubt that she was telling him the truth. He guided the buggy closer to the underbrush, located a tree to which he could hitch Mac and stepped down. Then he held out his arms and Lavinia sprang into them. This time they closed around her, pressing her close to him, and she remained quiescent in his embrace. He could have kissed her now, he realized, and she would not have resisted that, either. But even while he held her, he realized that the moment for this, though it might be near, had not yet come.

He released her, gazed at her with eyes of love, untinged by the bitterness and disappointment which had engulfed him so short a time before, and almost instantly he knew that there was something akin to love in the eyes that met his. Perhaps it had been there earlier and he had been too blind to see it. No matter; he saw it now. He was sure of it. Lavinia smiled and his heart missed a beat.

The candles were burning low now. Lavinia put her hand on Claude's arm and read softly.

"AURIETTE DE BACHEMIN

EPOUSE BIEN AIMEE

DU

CHEVALIER ANDRE DE BACHEMIN

SON VEUF INCONSOLABLE

ERIGE CE MONUMENT

*A LA MEMOIRE
D'UN ESPRIT PUR FIDELE ET COURAGEUX
JUSQUA LA MORT."*

"'Beloved wife, pure of spirit, brave and faithful until death,'" Lavinia whispered. "Yes, I—I think I understand why your mother wants to be buried in that tomb. And I think she ought to be—that she deserves to be. When she dies, you'll bring her here, won't you Claude?"

"I've promised. And you'll come with me then, too, won't you, Lavinia?"

He was conscious of the tears on her face when she lifted it for the kiss. But he did not try to question their cause. It was enough for him that she did not draw away when he took her in his arms.

Both the Winslow and the Villac families were, of course, delighted with the news of the engagement. Nothing was said about a wedding before Advent, which was, after all, now almost at hand; but preparations were soon astir for a wedding on Christmas Day. Anne Villac's condition was becoming rapidly worse and it was obvious to everyone that, no matter how great an effort she made, Anne would not be able to get far from home. When Father Gassler, the resident pastor at Iota, was consulted, he said that, under the circumstances, he would be glad to perform the ceremony at the bride's home. This would not be the first time he had done so, by any means, in the case of a mixed marriage.

Only the members of the two families were present at the marriage ceremony; but all the best friends of both families were added to the gathering for the wedding breakfast, which was also Christmas dinner. It did not seem unnatural to anyone that Dr. Mouton should leave immediately after dinner, for he was a busy man and if anyone thought it was strange that the elder Villacs left at the same time, no one said so. It was a beautiful balmy day, and all the other guests lingered.

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When Lavinia went upstairs to change from the beautiful snowy dress, with the balloon sleeves and the full-gored skirt, which was the very latest style and vastly becoming to her besides, into the blue traveling suit, the guests were so replete with good food they could hardly bestir themselves to stroll out into Mary's garden, where her camellias were in full bloom, and prepare to throw old shoes after the decorated surrey in which Jim Garland was going to drive the bridal pair to the depot.

Nothing had been said about an extended wedding trip. It was Lavinia herself who had remarked that she could not think of a nicer place to go than over to the Pass, but that she was sure she and Claude could see all they wanted of the Gulf Coast in a week's time. No one did much work at a rice mill or anywhere else between Christmas and New Year's. But on the second of January Claude would be back at work again and she could start getting straightened around in their new house.

The bride and groom surprised everyone by getting back on New Year's Eve, instead of a day later. That, Claude announced, had been Lavinia's idea, too; she said that as long as Christmas had been spent at her house she wanted to spend New Year's at his.

It was hours before anyone retired for the night, however. The entire family gathered in Anne's room, and Mezalee showed Lavinia how to make the "Queen's Sauce," their favorite night-cap, which they never failed to drink on New Year's Eve. When Mezalee had poured the hot, fragrant mixture carefully into cups and passed them around, Anne was the first to raise hers for a toast to a happy New Year; and when the answering chorus had died down, she added, "Now we goin' sleep, us, I guarantee you it will be a fine sleep, yes, account everybody gets a fine sleep after they drink Queen's Sauce. *Allons*, everybody. Everybody exceptin' only Claude an' Lavinia." She drew the bride down beside her. "You got to sit by me a little while yet, *chères*. Maybe you could tell me about the Pass. We never

got there, us. I mean me an' Ursin. We always planned to see that ocean, but somehow . . . I guarantee you, me. . . ."

Her voice trailed contentedly away into silence and she closed her eyes. As all the others trooped away, Mezalee beckoned to Claude and he, too, went into the next room.

"Dr. Mouton stopped by again this afternoon, before you and Lavinia got here," she said. "He keeps *Tante* more or less under opiates all the time now, of course. He told me he'd be back tomorrow, but he didn't think she'd suffer any tonight and she hasn't. I believe it's been one of the happiest nights of her life."

"Same here," he answered emphatically. "All right, Lavinia and I will stay with her a while, like she asked. She might rouse up long enough to ask a few questions."

At the end of an hour Anne was still sleeping peacefully. Claude rose, his arm still around Lavinia, and together they tiptoed out of the sickroom and into the one that had been so lovingly prepared for them.

They, too, were sleeping when Mezalee came in the morning and stood by their bedside, looking down at them long and fondly before she waked them. "You mustn't feel that I've come to bring you sad tidings," she told them. "You mustn't grieve. This is the way she hoped it would be, after she'd lived to see you married. *Tante* never woke again or spoke again after she told you she wanted you to stay beside her."

The only previous time that Lavinia had been seriously affected by the loss of someone close to her had been when her grandmother Garland died. She had been a child then, carefully shielded from all the details connected with preparations for burial, and the memory of the funeral services themselves had become a dim and distant one. Even if all this had not been so, she would have been utterly unprepared for the proceedings which followed Anne Villac's peaceful and merciful release from suffering.

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All day long people were assembling, drinking coffee, eating *cush-cush et caillé* and biscuits drenched in syrup, singing sad songs, going into the chamber where Anne lay dead, to evoke memories of their long association with her and lament the ending of this, then coming out again with their handkerchiefs half hiding their faces before resuming their singing, their stitching, their eating and drinking. As time went on, every room in the house was filled; so were the porch and the yard. *But when night comes, they will go home*, Lavinia said to herself. *They will go away and it will be quiet*. But though some of those who had come from a distance did go home, many others stayed, and Claude and Lavinia sat on straight chairs all night, with other members of the family, around the candlelighted bed where Anne lay.

Early the next morning, a crude hearse, to which everyone referred as the *corbillard*, came into the yard, drawn by two black horses and driven by one of the men who worked in the lumberyard. The buggies, already reassembled and filled with black-clad mourners, readily fell into line behind it. The day was unseasonably warm, the road into Crowley seemingly even rougher than usual; and, after the long Requiem Mass at the little mission church, there still remained the task of encasing the crude coffin in a still cruder box for shipment to Slidell, and the inevitable overnight wait at New Orleans before the sad journey could be completed and the final interment could take place in the forest cemetery at Lacombe.

The Bachemins had done all they could in preparation for this: the tomb of Auriette and André had been opened for the reception of Anne's coffin, the tiny cemetery plot put in the same exquisite order it would have received for *Toussaint*. But by the time the burial was over, it was too late to start back to New Orleans. The night was spent at Slidell with the Bachemins, whose house was not sufficiently large to accommodate all the Crowley relatives in any sort of comfort, though they did the best they could by providing makeshift sleeping arrangements, putting all the men in one room and all the women in another.

BLUE CAMELLIA

The following day, by the time they reached the *maisonette*, where they were to stop for dinner, Lavinia was by no means the only member of the group who was almost frantic with fatigue. The emotional excitement which had sustained the mourners at first had been engulfed in exhaustion. And still the journey back to Crowley remained to be faced. . . .

Eventually, Lavinia succeeded in drawing Claude aside and hesitantly suggested that perhaps it would be better for her to stay over and collect the belongings which had never been removed from the Labadies' house since *Toussaint*.

"I think you're right," Claude said reluctantly. "I hate to leave you behind. I'd stay with you, but I know Père's counting on me to see him through his homecoming—it's going to be a pretty hard one, all around. But I'd rather have you stay now than come back after I'd got you to Crowley. Promise me you won't miss the train tomorrow, darling."

Lavinia parted the curtains of the drawing room and stood waving as the Primeaux and the Villacs got into the waiting hacks. Claude, with his foot already on the step of the second one, turned to make sure she was really there and to throw her one last kiss. Then someone reached out from inside the hack and pulled him in and slammed the door and they were off. Involuntarily, Lavinia sighed.

"It's wonderful to be so much in love, isn't it, *chère*?" Mlle Haydee, who was also standing by the window, asked softly.

"Ye-e-s," Lavinia answered. Of course it was wonderful, of course she should be glad and thankful that she was happily married, that she would not have to lead a life barren of love, like the kind old lady beside her. But she was so tired that she was not glad about anything or thankful for anything. She was numb with fatigue.

"Why don't you rest for a little while, *chère*, before you start your packing?" Mlle Haydee said, "You look exhausted, and no wonder, *pauvre petite*! You have been under a great strain. It will be very quiet in the house and that will be good for you. Before we knew you would be with us again, we had

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promised *Cousine* Ernestine that we would have dinner with her. We would gladly have canceled this engagement, if we had thought our presence here would alleviate loneliness which would be painful to you. We still can. But almost the first instant I saw you, I thought solitude was what you wanted—what you needed. Solitude and rest. Was I wrong?"

"No, you were right. I *am* very tired and—yes, I do feel as if I'd like to be alone for a little while."

Her eyes filled with unwelcome tears, which she tried in vain to wink back before they showed on her cheeks. Mlle Haydee patted her shoulder.

"There, there, my dear! Go and lie down. And do not worry about sleeping past dinnertime. Mignon will bring you something on a tray, whenever you call her."

Conscious as she was of her weariness, Lavinia had not realized that she was actually overwhelmed by it until she started up the little stairway. When she reached the *cabinet* she flung herself down on the bed without even taking off her dress, though she fumbled at the fastenings to undo the tight collar and loosen the belt.

It was a long time before she emerged from the abyss of deep slumber and reached the realm of dreams at the borderland between sleep and drowsiness. When she did, she dreamed that her name was being spoken in tones of infinite yearning, and that she was being kissed, at first very gently, on her brow; then less gently on her throat; and then, not gently at all, on her mouth. The sound of her name was sweet, in her dream, and the kisses were sweet, too, so sweet that she wanted to return them. Then gradually she realized that she was not dreaming any more, that the kisses were real; and it came to her, not hazily or slowly, but in a flash, that there was a new quality in Claude's love-making, something that had never been there before, even in his most passionate moments.

"So you came back?" she murmured, still contending with her drowsiness and striving to inject a note of welcome into her voice.

"Yes, of course I came back. You knew I would, sometime, didn't you?"

With a swiftness that was terrifying, she was wide awake. Stifling a scream, she struggled to free herself. The light in the room was very dim, for dusk had fallen while she was sleeping. The form bending over her, the face so close to her own, might well have been Claude's, as she had taken for granted, for all she could see. But the voice was unmistakable. It did not belong to Claude. It belonged to Fleex.

She could not speak again, she could not make another move. Fleex had come back. Fleex had come back and she was married to Claude. She was married to Claude. . . .

"Say yes, of course you knew I would, darling. I know I told you I wouldn't, in the stupid letter I wrote you; but you must have realized that was only because I didn't have anything to offer you then, not even a place to take you, and didn't see how I ever would have. But the minute my luck turned. . . ."

The minute his luck turned! Then it had turned, he did have something to offer her, a place to take her. Not that it would ever have mattered to her, if he hadn't. It was Fleex, just Fleex that she had always wanted. . . .

"I'm sorry I startled you. But, *mon coeur*, it's been so long!"

His hungry eyes were devouring her, her shining, disordered hair and flushed cheeks, her lips, redder than he remembered them, and redder than they would have been now, he knew, if he had not kissed them so long and so hard. Then his gaze shifted to her slender throat and white neck and came to rest on the hollow between her breasts which the opened dress had partially revealed.

"*Mon coeur*," he said again, "*je t'en prie*. . . ."

"My heart"—the most precious, the most intimate form of endearment! He had used it for the second time. They had always used the familiar form of "thou" when speaking to each other in French—that was natural; all children, all members of a family and close friends did so. The French was natural, too;

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it had always been their custom to use it when they were alone together. But he had never called her *mon coeur* before tonight, he had never begged her for any privilege or any favor. How could she deny him now? This was love, the kind of love she had allowed everyone to persuade her she was waiting in vain to receive.

"I can't," she said brokenly. "Fleex, please—please don't say that to me again. Please don't even kiss me again."

"*Please don't even kiss you again!* Are you crazy? Mignon told me the Labadies wouldn't be home until late, that they were having supper with a cousin. We've oceans of time. I suppose that eventually we'll have to go down to the drawing room and put in a decorous appearance. And of course I'll announce that we're going to be married right away. Meanwhile, what really matters is that you're here, that I'm here; that we haven't seen each other in months and months and that we're terribly in love with each other."

"I'm sorry, but there are some other things that matter a good deal, too." Lavinia had found her voice at last, and though she spoke with difficulty, she did so with determination. "You didn't ask how I happened to be in Lacombe and, obviously, Mignon didn't tell you that, either. I went there for Anne Villac's funeral."

His expression instantly changed. "I'm sorry," he said gravely. "Sorry she's died and sorry I didn't get in a day sooner. I'd have liked to show my respect by going to her funeral. She was always very good to me—very forbearing. I was really fond of her, though I'm afraid I didn't always act as if I were—in fact, I know the way I did act must have troubled her a good share of the time. Perhaps it's just as well I didn't get to Lacombe after all. I might not have been especially welcome. I know I'm the black sheep of the family. And then, Claude was always so jealous of me. It must have been bad enough for him to lose his mother, without finding out at the same time that he was going to lose you. I don't think he ever really believed he would."

BLUE CAMELLIA

"No, I don't believe he ever did. And he hasn't."

"What are you talking about? Of course he has."

For the first time Fleex spoke roughly. There was no help for it. She could not prolong the delay, she could not soften the blow. She must tell him, straight out, as quickly as she could, even though by doing so quickly she had to do so cruelly. Somehow she managed to slip from his arms and stand, facing him.

"Claude and I were married on Christmas Day," she said.



CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the very general opinion that Claude and Lavinia Villac were outstanding among the young couples, not only in Crowley and on its outlying farms, but as far west as Lake Charles and as far east as New Iberia.

They were devoted to each other, to their children Prosper and Anne Marie, and to all the members of the Primeaux, Villac and Winslow families. They had a host of friends, they were public spirited, they were charitable, they were farseeing; they believed in the future of Crowley and earnestly desired to do their share toward its growth and its improvement. In a place which had its fair share of small-town gossip, jealousies and factionalism, the young Villacs escaped enmity and even criticism. Everyone liked them and wished them well; no one begrudged them their happiness and their prosperity.

Claude had risen quickly from the position of assistant manager to manager of the clean rice department in the Columbia Mill; and eventually he left it to become general manager of the Monrovia Mill. Tibier, the manager of the Columbia Mill, was sorry to see Claude go; but he was too just a man to harbor hard feelings over an advancement which he himself would not have been able to offer, for Claude's job was now better than his own. Besides, it was generally known that Jim Garland controlled much of the stock in the Monrovia and that he was buying up more all the time; and though Garland was a shrewd businessman, and would not have given the boy a boost if he had not been worth it, merely because he was a relation, no one could blame the old gentleman for seeing that his granddaughter's husband was put in charge of this mill, since Garland was serving his own best interests and those of

the other stockholders by availing himself of Claude Villac's industry, intelligence, integrity and experience.

The young Villacs were fond of their friends, but they were so much fonder of each other that, without ever seeming inhospitable or unsociable, they managed to keep a good many evenings free from engagements. During the busy season, Claude was sometimes obliged to return to the mill after supper; but this was now the exception rather than the rule. Lavinia was never out at the time of his homecoming. She was always waiting to receive him, smiling, composed and very pleasing to look at. There was a good drink ready for him and a good supper underway; and afterward, when the children had been put to bed, he and she had a game of checkers or cribbage together, or she played the piano while he read.

It was because this leisurely and agreeable pattern was so well established that Lavinia was mildly surprised when he came home one evening, obviously in a hurry, and told her he thought they had better cut their drinks short and have supper as soon as Verna, their maid, could get it on the table; he would have to go back to the mill as quickly as he could. Lavinia made the necessary adjustments without comment. However, when she heard him ask Sylvester, Verna's husband, to hitch up the buggy, she was still more surprised; Claude sometimes rode to the mill, but he almost never drove, except in very bad weather. The day had been mild and clear, the sunset beautiful; the moon was almost at its full and would soon be up. She was tempted to suggest going with him; but Verna had been promised release the minute supper was over, to attend a camp meeting, and, of course, she could not leave Prosper and Anne Marie alone in the house. Neither could she refrain from asking a question.

"You're driving? Taking someone with you?"

He nodded, without answering otherwise and turned toward the dining room.

"There isn't anything wrong at the mill, is there, Claude?"

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"No. But I really ought to stay late, this time of year, oftener than I do. Tonight I must. There's a shipment for Vera Cruz overdue already. I've got to make sure it catches the morning eastbound. I may have to go to another warehouse, too, if my shipment's short. That's why I want the buggy."

"I see."

She was not sure that she did. First he gave the impression that he was taking someone with him immediately, to the mill; then he spoke of going to another warehouse later. There was nothing actually contradictory between the two, but somehow they did not quite seem to fit. And it was not like Claude to have his shipments overdue. There was something here that was not fully understandable or explained and it worried her a little; but she would have to wait for an understanding or an explanation. Obviously, this was not the time to harass her husband with questions, when she guessed that something was troubling him already, though he did not say so. She saw that he had supper in record time; then she kissed him good-by and watched him hurry out to the waiting buggy.

Lavinia had been quite right in believing that something was amiss when her husband came home, but no guess she could possibly have made would have given her the solution of the riddle. A little before six, Claude had been sitting in his office, a "stone" spread out before him. He was spreading rough rice over the flat stone, rubbing the grains vigorously with the smaller one, and then examining the hulled grain to grade it.

Conscious of another presence, he looked up and saw that the sheriff was standing in the door. Claude hailed him cordially. "How!" he exclaimed grinning. "Come in and light. What you got on your mind this far ahead of election time?"

"Not a hell of a lot, Claude, but it's something you can help us out on. I mean help a lot. It's about Fleex Primeaux."

Claude did not answer instantly. When he did, he spoke guardedly. "I haven't seen Fleex in years," he said slowly, "but he's my cousin and we grew up as close as red beans and rice.

BLUE CAMELLIA

I don't know what you've got on your mind, but if it's what I think, just bear in mind the old one about every man skinning his own skunk."

"Oh, hell, Claude, it's not all that serious. You know how Fleex has always been when he gets liquored up. He's a fightin' fool. He's had trouble several times in the city. That's no secret. Fleex got into town a couple of nights ago, and ran into Polydore Lasseigne. You know him, don't you?"

"Sure. I made him an offer on his rice crop this fall, but he was bound and determined he would sell it in the city."

"Well, they run into each other in some cabbyray or other and they were both drinking. Polydore's a loudmouth when he's sober, let alone with booze to oil his jaws; and Fleex—well, if you don't know 'bout Fleex and how he is when he's drinkin', there's no use me trying to tell you."

"All right, Tobe. All right. So what happened?"

"Exactly what you'd expect. Mr. Loudmouth and Mr. Tough Stuff got in a fight and it wound up with Loudmoth on the floor."

"God Almighty, not dead, was he?"

"Him? Hell, no! Scared to death, maybe, but not cut to death. A stab here and a slit there, and blood enough to make him faint dead away at the sight of it, but nothing they couldn't stitch up and tell him to go home and sleep off the rest of it."

"Well, if that's the way it is, what's troubling you?"

"Fleex evidently thought it was worse than that, because he joined the bird gang and flew the coop. Nobody knows where. Of course, I got my ideas like a person would have, but officially I don't know nothing about it, see? Now I could get hold of the sheriff of St. Landry, and get him and me both to raise a posse and drag the parts of the swamps where he's likely to be. But if he sees a gang like that coming toward him, he'll think he's wanted for something a lot bigger than just a Saturday night cuttin' scrape and somebody's liable to get shot bringing him in. Then the fat will be in the fire for true enough."

"So you want me to get word to him some way? . . ."

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"Cut it out, Claude. I want you to go by yourself and tell him to give himself up because there's nothing but a barroom brawl against him. I already talked to that worthless tub, Polydore Lasseigne, and he says he ain't got no idea of going to the city to testify against Fleex, so they don't even have a case against him."

Claude absently stirred the hulled grains on his emery stone with the tip of one blunt finger.

"I've got an idea where somebody might find Fleex. Course, it might not be the right idea, but the worst that could come of a try would be a failure. So this is what I'll do. It's most supper-time, and I'll go up to the house and tell Lavinia I've got to come back to the mill to get out a shipment for the morning. That way she won't worry; this time of year I ought to work all hours, anyway. But you back me up in it. If it comes to the clutch, you've got to swear I was working here."

"Kee-rect!"

"I'll be leaving the house by before seven and, if Lavinia asks me what I'm taking the buggy for, instead of walking to the mill, I'll spin her some kind of a tale about having to go to some warehouse if my shipment's short. And, if my idea's the right one, I'll be back with Fleex before ten. Before half past, anyway."

The steady clop-clop rhythm of shod hoofs was muffled by the soft dirt of the roadway once Claude turned off the main traffic route in the direction of Prairie Jeunesse.

Claude had long since ceased to be jealous of Fleex, indeed he had almost forgotten that rivalry had ever existed between them and that Lavinia's persistent preference for Fleex had been a source of resentful anxiety. She never mentioned his name any more, unless someone else did so first; it seemed obvious to Claude, when he thought about the matter at all, that she had practically forgotten his cousin. Personally, Claude felt it was too bad Fleex had not been minded to settle here and grow

with the country. Perhaps, once this hodgepodge about Las-seigne was cleared up, he might yet be persuaded to do so.

The horse splashed into the shallow bed of a tributary of Bayou Nezpiqué, which must be forded. Claude was very near the point where he must leave his buggy and proceed on foot. It would be a sorry sort of joke on him if Fleex had not sought sanctuary here, but had holed up in New Orleans, or maybe Lacombe, until he could make his way safely aboard ship.

Claude tethered his horse to one of the saplings in the next *youpon copse*. He stopped to pat his mare's cheek affectionately and then strode off into the swamp.

He certainly wasn't dressed for it, he thought to himself ruefully. If Lavinia was still up by the time he returned, he would have a lot of explaining to do, as to why and how and where he had become covered with mud.

He went on—floundering where he could not help it, wading watercourses where he must, upbraiding himself for the clumsy way in which he moved through the clashing palmetto leaves in a veritable uproar. Of course, Fleex might not even be at the hideaway, now but a short distance off. If he were there, he would certainly taunt Claude for having forgotten all his woodcraft and making more noise than a railroad train in going through the swamps.

He must be almost at his journey's end. He could feel he was on rising, firmer ground. Just beyond the next open glade would be the hideaway. One of his shoes had become unlaced. He bent over, raising his foot to a fallen cypress log, before sending a halloo across the glade to call Fleex, if Fleex were there. He never knew what made him look up; some whisper of alien sound, perhaps simply some premonition of peril. He saw a stab of flame, but by the time the heavy crump of a shotgun blast reached him, he had sunk down through a black and bottomless well of agony into oblivion.

"Lord Almighty! It's Claude!"

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The anguished words, half whisper and half groan, were torn from Fleex's throat. He did not even know that he had uttered them, as he sank on his knees beside the still form. Then he began to babble frantically. "I never meant to do it, not to you! I wouldn't go to hurt you, I swear on my mother's grave I wouldn't. You got to listen to me, you got to tell me. . . ."

His desperate appeal was voiced without volition; it was based on no wild belief that there would be a response to it. Claude was clearly unconscious. Nevertheless, Fleex continued his incoherent pleading as he ran a groping hand over his cousin's chest, hoping against hope to find signs of life. The hand was instantly covered with blood, but under it he could feel a spasmodic rise and fall.

"I didn't know it was you!" he cried. "You got to believe that, Claude! Can you hear me, man, can you?"

With a stab of relief that was like a sharp pain, Fleex saw the fallen man's eyes flutter open.

"Yes, I hear you," he whispered. Then his voice, weak at first, became stronger and steadier. "I know you never meant to do it. And I'm not bad hit. You used to shoot straighter than that."

"Don't joke, man, you've got blood all over you. Your shoulder's punctured. I've got some clean cloth in the cabin, I'll tie it up. Are you hit anywhere else?"

"My leg, I think. Maybe my chest, too. But it'll take a lot more than that to keep me down. Help me up, so I can sit on that log."

Fleex leaned his shotgun upright against the log, then stooped and slipped sinewy arms under the recumbent figure and eased it gently down again. A swift examination showed that Claude was right: his head revealed only a slight contusion; but blood was flowing as freely from his leg as from his shoulder, and there was another bullet puncture at the right side of the chest.

"That one don't look so bad though," Fleex said thankfully. "At least, it isn't bleeding as much as the others." He went swiftly into the cabin, returning with some white cloth which he tore into strips and bound tightly around the thigh and

shoulder wounds to stop their bleeding. As he worked, he went on talking.

"I'm so thankful I didn't kill you, I'm almost ready to give myself up for butchering that fat idiot, Polydore Lasseigne, in New Orleans. You see, I thought the posse was after me for murder. That's how I happened—"

"You'll give all hell up," Claude exclaimed with sudden spirit. "I came out here to tell *you* about Polydore. You didn't need to run away on account of him. He isn't even bad hurt. Just a stab here and there, Tobe Bennett—he's high sheriff now—told me. Tobe says there isn't even a case against you, but he was afraid, if he sent a posse after you, you'd shoot somebody and get shot yourself. So he asked me to look you up, and I said sure—"

"I wouldn't shoot you! That's what you told him, isn't it? And then that's just what I did do! Well, it's done now, and I've tied you up as well as I know how and I'm getting you to a doctor quick."

"Not to a doctor. To Lavinia. Home. I came in the buggy. When I get home, Lavinia'll see to everything. She's wonderful. She'll get hold of a doctor. Besides, I want to get into my own bed."

For the first time, since he had found Claude, words did not come pouring out of Fleex's throat; instead, he had to swallow hard before he spoke.

"Sure," he finally managed to say. "That'll be best—to get you home first and have Lavinia send for a doctor and look after you while we're waiting for him to come."

As gently as possible, he helped Claude rise, and slung his cousin across his shoulders in the "fireman's carry" that had been a feature of every boat drill in which he had taken part since he ran away to sea. Then he made his way, steadily and carefully to where the buggy was hitched.

"There you are!" he said with well-assumed cheerfulness. "Now, just as soon as I unhitch this old crowbait of yours, we'll be on our way into town. All you have to do is to take it easy

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and show me where you live. Remember, I haven't been to Crowley in more than ten years."

"That's ten years too long. But you won't have any trouble finding your way. They never did change the original layout, even if Crowley's almost a city now."

For a few minutes, he spoke with pride of the wonderful progress that had been made in his home town. Then he lapsed into silence. Fleex had to remind Claude again that he would need to know the exact address; after that, of course he could find his way there all right. Claude gave the address and added a description of his home and its grounds, again speaking with pride. After that, he fell silent a second time. Every now and then Fleex asked, "How you making out?" and the answer was invariably the same, "I'm all right." But Fleex did not feel so sure of it.

Claude was leaning more heavily against him and Fleex shifted his position slightly, hoping to give the wounded man greater ease. Was it a mistake, he wondered, to try driving so fast? Inevitably, it meant more jolting, for even the best part of the road was rough; but he did not dare risk a moment's unnecessary delay.

Claude, who had been silent for so long that Fleex thought he might again have lapsed into unconsciousness, suddenly struggled into a more upright position and spoke clearly and happily.

"Take the next turn to the left and go up two blocks. As I told you, it's a corner house—the white one with a deep gallery—the prettiest house in Crowley. And it has the prettiest yard. And listen, did you know? I've got two of the cutest kids. I want you to see them. They'll be asleep now, of course, but you can go into the nursery and look at them."

"I'd like to. Boys or girls? How old are they?" Fleex asked, for the sake of saying something.

"One of each—Prosper and Anne Marie. Seven and four. We lost our first baby—that is, Lavinia had a miscarriage a few months after we were married. Of course, it was a dreadful

disappointment at the time. But I don't think Lavinia grieves over it any more. Anyway, she never talks about it. And I don't—I've got so much else."

You've got so much else! I'll say you have! A wonderful wife, two cute kids, the prettiest house in Crowley. But can you keep them? Have you got enough life left in you after what I've done to you? I've coveted everything you've got, I tried to steal Lavinia from you, I wanted to father her children. But I wouldn't have killed you to do it. I went away and left you a clear field. And now that I've come back—Sainte Marie, Mère de Dieu. . . .

The unspoken words were choking him. But Claude was speaking again, with happiness in his voice.

"We're home, Fleex."

It was true. Fleex had been too distraught to notice when the faithful old horse stopped. The porch light was on, the window shades raised to show the cheerful glow of lamps inside.

This time, Fleex did not fling the helpless figure across his shoulders, but cradled it in his arms, as he bore it over the flower-bordered path and up the gallery steps toward the lighted door, which opened at his approach. Evidently, Lavinia had been listening for footsteps, waiting to receive her husband. Now she stood, framed in the entrance, lovely and expectant, her white dress luminous, her golden hair crowning her with its radiance. Her sudden cry of horror pierced Fleex's heart with a sharper thrust than any knife could have given. Then, soothing and silencing her, came Claude's quick, kind words.

"Don't be frightened, darling. There's been an accident, but everything's all right now. Fleex was there to bring me home."

There were no more screams, there was not even a delaying question. Swiftly, calmly, Lavinia led the way upstairs to a pleasant chamber. She whipped back a flowered counterpane and fluffy blankets from a wide four-poster, and Fleex laid his burden down. Claude looked up and smiled. "That's what I

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wanted, to be in my own bed," he said. "I'll be all right now. But, honey, maybe you'd better see if you can get hold of a doctor. Fleex'll stay with me while you telephone."

She bent over to kiss him and he lifted his uninjured arm and patted her shoulder. Then as she sped down the stairs, Claude turned his head to look at Fleex. "I'm sorry my good luck was your bad luck, Fleex."

"I'm not. This is the way that it ought to be."

"I hope you really feel that way." Claude closed his eyes, apparently satisfied that no more needed to be said. Claude's eyes were still closed. Fleex and Lavinia, standing face to face, looked into each others. No words were needed to say that this was a matter of life and death.

The wait seemed interminable though it was actually only a short time before Dr. Morris arrived. Fleex hastened downstairs to admit the doctor, escorted him up to the bedroom and then returned to the front hall to another seemingly interminable wait.

Presently Dr. Morris, his face furrowed with fatigue, came down the stairs and stopped beside him. "It's all over," he said gravely. "The poor fellow's drowned in his own blood."

"*Drowned in his own blood!*" exclaimed Fleex.

"Yes. The wounds on the shoulder and thigh didn't amount to anything—he could have recovered from those all right. It was the one in his chest that killed him. An internal hemorrhage gradually filled his lungs. From what Lavinia told me, over the telephone, I gather he was brought some distance in a buggy after the accident. If it had only been possible to bring him on a stretcher and save all that jolting—"

"It would have been. I could have left him and gone for help. But it would have taken a long while and, meantime, he would have had to stay alone and he wanted to get home to his wife. I thought the sooner he did—"

"You acted for what you thought was the best, of course. Well, it's a sad business. I'll get word to Lavinia's parents, so you needn't worry about that."

"Is it all right for me to go upstairs again? I'd like to say good-by to him if I could. And—and to his wife—I mean, his widow. But if you think I shouldn't—"

"No, I think you should. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Villac asked me to tell you she hoped you would. It might not be a bad plan for you to stay with her until her parents can get here. Of course, I'll have to report this accident to the authorities. So far, I'm rather in the dark as to exactly what happened." He paused, as if giving Fleex the opportunity of making an answer; but, as no reply was forthcoming, he went on, "I'm sure you'll give me all the information you can. But it can wait until morning."

"It might as well, mightn't it? Morning's almost here."

"Yes. Well, good night again."

When Fleex re-entered the bedchamber, Lavinia was standing by a window just inside the door. All her radiance was gone, but in its place was a new quietude and a new dignity, an acceptance of tragedy which, far from crushing her, had given her greater stature than ever before. She had never seemed so beautiful.

She did not move or speak as he walked over to the bed and looked down at his cousin. Fleex made the sign of the cross and knelt beside the bed, bowing his head. Then he came back to the place where Lavinia was standing.

"I loved him better than anyone in the world except you. Now I've killed him and ruined your life. This is the end for me," he said.

On the threshold of her husband's death chamber, they stood looking at each other, as powerless to escape the aftermath of the catastrophe which had engulfed them as they had been powerless to express their love and longing when they had stood, many years before, looking at each other on either side of a garden gate. Then Fleex turned and walked slowly down the stairs and out of the house. Lavinia closed the door and went nearer to the window. Dawn was just breaking. There were streaks of rosy light above the trees, but beneath them, every-

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thing was still in semidarkness. She could see Fleex as he went down the garden walk. After that, he was swallowed up in the shadows. But she continued to stand motionless by the window, as if she were watching for the desperate act she would not see and listening for the shot she would not hear.

CHAPTER NINE

As Brent Winslow sat waiting for Lavinia to come downstairs, he glanced around her pleasant living room, with growing impatience. He could not imagine what was keeping her so long. Callie had greeted him at the door on his arrival and had said that Miss Lavinia would be right down. That was half an hour ago. It would be harder to talk to her now than it would have been if they had been closer together all these years. She had never told him her troubles, she had never confided in him about anything. She had had secrets from him even when she was a young girl. That horrible cabin in the swamp, for instance. . . .

He had become so absorbed in thought that he did not hear Lavinia when she finally came into the room, and he looked up with a start to see that she was standing close beside him. He was appalled by her appearance. On the day of Claude's funeral, she had been veiled all the time, both in the church and at the cemetery; now he saw that the fresh color, which had been one of her greatest attractions, was completely gone. In her white face, her eyes seemed preternaturally large and there were dark circles underneath them. She had on a plain black dress, unrelieved by even a touch of white; it fitted her closely and in it she no longer looked slender; she looked emaciated. Before he had sufficiently recovered from the shock of seeing her like this, she spoke to him, and her voice had changed, too. He had heard it once or twice long before, when it had seemed to him hard for a young girl's, but it had never been hard like this.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, and it seemed to him she was suggesting that it was abnormal for a father to visit his newly widowed daughter, instead of the most natural thing in the world.

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"Yes, dear," he answered. He wanted to put his arms around her, urging her to lay her head on his shoulder and have a good cry, after which she would feel better, but he did not dare attempt the caress. Certainly Lavinia's manner did not encourage it; and though undoubtedly it *would* help her if she could have a good cry, he had never seen a woman who appeared less likely to shed healing tears. "I've been concerned about you, of course," he continued lamely. "Your mother and I have been rather worried. You haven't telephoned, as usual, and every time we've called you, Callie has said that you couldn't speak to us just then."

"There wasn't anything I wanted to say. There's nothing I want to say now."

"Then perhaps you'll let me talk to you. Because there are quite a number of things I want to say. First of all, of course, I want to tell you that your mother and I stand ready to help you in any way we possibly can through this hard period. We gathered you wanted to be alone, at first. In fact, your mother says you told her so the—the day of the funeral. And then, when we couldn't reach you by telephone . . . but it's over a week now since—the tragedy."

"Which tragedy?"

"Why—Claude's death, of course."

"I just wanted to be sure. Perhaps you've forgotten that the day after Fleex found out he'd killed Claude, he killed himself."

"No, of course, I haven't forgotten. And of course that's very sad too—very tragic. But we can't speak of it in the same breath with the other. After all, Fleex went out of our lives years ago and—"

"He never went out of my life. When you love a man the way I loved Fleex, he doesn't go out of your life just because you don't see him."

"But, my dear, you did dismiss him from your mind—very sensibly, very bravely. I know you went through a hard time when he ran off to sea. I know that, for a while, you kept hoping against hope that he'd come back. But he didn't and, very

wisely, you listened to reason from your elders. Finally, you realized it was Claude who really deserved your affection and you returned his. You married him, you were his faithful and devoted wife for ten years. You never saw Fleex again until he came staggering up to your door."

"I'm afraid you don't know quite as much as you think you do. I never dismissed Fleex from my mind for more than a few hours at a time. I did try to, because that was what everyone told me I ought to do. After all, I was only seventeen, and I was not only terribly hurt, I was terribly confused. But I tried to reason things out, as well as I could, and it was natural for me to suppose that older people—people who were fond of me—knew better than I did. You're right about one thing—Claude did deserve my affection—affection and respect. But affection and respect aren't the same as love. The way I loved Fleex was the way Mother loves you," Lavinia went on. "She loved you enough to marry you when you were poor. She suffered and slaved and never complained. She loved you enough to leave her home and her people and strike out with you to an unknown wilderness. She's loved you enough to stand by you, year after year, while you've shut yourself up with your work, too full of it to think whether there was anything else she might like to be doing or not. I won't try to say much about the way Fleex loved me. But I think I've got a right to say he didn't ask as much of me as you've asked of Mother."

"Lavinia, how can you be so unjust? I've never looked at another woman, I've been as steadfast as she has. And Fleex—"

"Yes, Fleex did look at other women, but that didn't have anything to do with the way he looked at me. He did run away, when he thought he didn't have anything to offer me. He didn't want me to slave and suffer or even to go without, though I was willing and eager to do it, if I could only be with him. But as soon as he did have something to offer me, he came back."

"What are you talking about?"

"He came back," Lavinia said, speaking deliberately and scornfully now. "That was something else you didn't know."

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You thought I never saw him again until ten days ago. You're wrong. I saw him ten days after I married Claude. He came and found me at the *maisonette*—in the *cabinet*. It was when Claude's mother died and he'd gone back to Crowley right after the funeral at Lacombe. I stayed over in New Orleans to collect the things I'd left there in the autumn. I was asleep when Fleex came and found me and took me in his arms and told me we could get married right away. He'd never dreamed I wouldn't wait for him.

"I never saw him from that night until the night he killed Claude. I've done the best I could," Lavinia said, speaking still more slowly. "I think I made Claude happy—well, I know I did. He couldn't have pretended to be happy, not for ten years. But, as far as I'm concerned, the marriage was a sham from the night that Fleex came back to me and took me in his arms. Now I'm through with shams. I'm going away from here and I'm never coming back. I'm going to do something real and be something real. I don't know yet what, but something."

"Lavinia, you can't go away! Why, you'd break your mother's heart if you did that! You'd—you'd break mine."

"You and mother didn't mind breaking my heart. I don't see why I should mind breaking yours. Anyway, as I just said, what I want now is reality. I'm going to have it."

"You can have something real and be something real without deserting your home and uprooting your children."

With a precipitancy which suggested that they must have been lurking somewhere in the front hall, awaiting a signal to enter, and that they had seized upon the word "children" as such a sign, Prosper and Anne Marie came running into the living room.

"It's too dark to play outside any more," Prosper announced. "Aren't you going to read to us, Mama?"

"Not until after supper. You and Anne Marie shouldn't come rushing in like this, Prosper, when I have company. You know that."

"Yes, but I didn't know Grandpa Winslow was company. I thought he was family."

BLUE CAMELLIA

"He is family, but he's company, too. He's talking to me and he doesn't want to be interrupted."

"I don't mind," Brent said quickly. "If they'd like to stay here while I'm talking to you, I'd be glad to have them."

"Perhaps you would, but I wouldn't."

Brent looked across at his grandson, to find that the little boy's magnificent dark eyes, usually so full of mischievous sparkle, were resting on him thoughtfully. "I'd especially like to have Prosper hear what I started to say when I told you you could have and do something real right here in Crowley, Lavinia," he persisted. "Prosper, I want your mother to manage the Monrovia Mill. I mean I want her to take care of it, the way your father did, until you're old enough to do it, for your mother and your sister and yourself."

"Oh, Mama, you will, won't you?" the child exclaimed eagerly.

"Prosper, you don't know what you're talking about. Your grandfather's only joking. I couldn't run a mill."

"Yes you could. There's nothing you can't do, Mama." He looked at her with loving pride, throwing his arms around her neck and kissing her. She did not return the caress.

"I just said, you don't know what you're talking about. Women don't run mills. Take your sister out to Callie and stay with her until I call you. Go on, Anne Marie."

Lavinia spoke with a sternness which admitted of no argument. Brent realized that, on top of rousing her anger, he had now incurred her resentment by interfering with her orders. Thoroughly discouraged by the unfortunate turn things had taken, he attempted to go on where he had left off. "I came here on purpose to talk to you about the mill, Lavinia," he said. "I wanted to offer you my sympathy and my help first, of course. But after that, I wanted to talk to you about this idea I've had."

"You must be crazier than I thought. There isn't a mill in Louisiana that would accept a woman for its manager."

"Yes, there is. The Monrovia would accept you. It wants you. The directors asked me to tell you so. They're convinced you'd protect its interests better than anyone else they could

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select, in Claude's place. After all, you're virtually its owner. Didn't you realize that?"

For the first time that evening, she was not ready with her retort. Yes, of course, she should have realized that, she told herself more quickly than she could say so aloud. Her grandfather had promoted the building of the Monrovia and had held a controlling interest in it from the beginning. He had been steadily buying up additional shares of stock, and he had put everything he acquired in either Claude's name or hers. Now, everything Claude had owned belonged to her and the children. Her obligation to Claude might be over; her obligation to their children was greater than ever, now that he was dead.

"It isn't like you, Lavinia, to be vague about anything. You're the owner of a very important piece of property, and its value is going to keep on increasing all the time. You can't neglect it."

"I can sell it," she said swiftly.

"Yes, you can sell it. But if you sell it, you must be sure you really want to. You've been trying to tell me, in your bitterness and grief, that you've been living a lie for ten years. You haven't been doing anything of the sort. You've been living courageously—righteously. I don't mind using biblical language. That's what you've been—a prudent and virtuous woman, the kind Solomon described. What's more, you've become a power in the community—a power of progress and good. You've sacrificed your personal happiness to do it. You sent away the man you could have had for a lover, even if you couldn't have him for a husband. If you'd kept him, then you *would* have been living a lie. And you couldn't have done and been everything else you've done and been. If you don't go on with Claude's work, you'll fail him now for the first time. You've got a torch to carry for him and you haven't any right to lay it down. You're needed here, Lavinia. You're wanted. Is there any other place where you're needed and wanted? Wouldn't you feel a great lack of what you've had for so long, and can go on having in greater and greater measure here, if you went among strangers? Could you be so sure of giving your children such a goodly heritage?"

BLUE CAMELLIA

Again she did not answer immediately. But she did not draw away from him, as he had been afraid she might when he put his arm around her shoulders.

"I wouldn't have any idea how to run a rice mill," she said at last.

"Wouldn't you?" For the first time in the course of their whole dreadful talk, he smiled. "You probably know as much about rice as any woman in Louisiana, if not more," he said. "You grew up on a rice farm. You were out weeding a rice field when you were only nine years old. You shared the discovery that the rice flowers open briefly at noon with your mother and me. You saw my first attempts at cross-pollination with the help of bees. You've followed my experiments in selection ever since. You've watched the march of progress in machinery and irrigation."

"Yes. But breeding and harvesting rice aren't the same as milling it."

"Granted. But it's never been hard for you to learn anything you wanted to, Lavinia. And this is your work now—your chance for success. By-and-by, it'll be your son's. It should be your son's. Don't sell his birthright for a mess of pottage."

There was a long silence. It was broken by the children's voices, coming to them from across the hall again. Lavinia rose, though not abruptly, as if to seem she was trying to disengage herself from her father's embrace. Quite the contrary; as soon as she was on her feet, she slipped her arm through his.

"They're getting hungry. It's past their suppertime," she said. "Would you care to stay and eat rice—and perhaps a few other things—with Prosper and Anne Marie and me? You could telephone Mother you wouldn't be home until a little later, couldn't you?"

It was when he was preparing to leave, considerably later, that Lavinia said something Brent had not dared to hope she would say.

"You haven't told me anything about your experiments in a long while," she reminded him. "Do you feel you're making any

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real progress toward that ideal variety you've been searching for all these years?"

He smiled. "Yes, I do," he said. "And I will talk to you about it the next time I come in for supper. I may be even crazier than you thought, but you and I are going to be partners. I'll grow the rice for farmers to sell you for milling and I believe it will make us both famous."

CHAPTER TEN

In the Monrovia Mill, the offices of rough rice, clean rice and bookkeeping were quartered in one large room on the ground floor. The rough rice office was equipped with shelves for samples and a long table with a trough along the edge; on this table was a "beaded" hardwood rubbing board and an emery rubbing stone. At the clean rice side of the room were more shelves along the wall, which were used for sample boxes; there was also another trough-edged table.

In only one respect did the Monrovia differ from most other mills: it boasted a small cubiform office which could be shut off from the noisy, cavernous room housing the three departments. Jim Garland, who had his own ideas about rice mills, as on most other subjects, had insisted on this office: a sales manager, Garland said, had a right to some privacy if and when he wanted it. The result was that, when Claude became the sales manager of the Monrovia, he had enjoyed a privilege almost unique in the locality—that of having his own small sanctum—and Lavinia had inherited it. It was Claude's sandy-haired, hatchet-faced assistant Henry Blanchard, who afterward became hers, that sat in the swivel chair at the roll-top desk in the clean rice department.

Henry was glad to see that Lavinia seemed to be taking the problems of the mill more in her stride than she had at first. It was a reflection of her more generally cheerful outlook on life. Still, he wished there were some way in which he could stop Brent Winslow from taking up so much of Lavinia's time. Henry knew it was Brent who had persuaded Lavinia to become the manager of the mill and that one of his strongest arguments had been that they would form a father and daughter partnership; but the assistant manager felt that the daughter was now

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contributing more to this partnership than the father. There was nothing to show that these long, frequent conferences were fruitful, as far as she was concerned; and, though Lavinia was a strong, healthy woman, Henry had the feeling that her father's visits, when the latter was tired and discouraged, often left her tired and discouraged, too.

It was therefore with a feeling of genuine concern for his employer that he watched Brent Winslow cross the floor of the clean rice department, one afternoon in early September and, after a few brief words of greeting here and there, enter the cubicle. There had been a bad storm the day before and Henry knew exactly what Winslow had come to say: that, in spite of all his careful selections of head and stool, all his patient experimentation with crossbreeding, he had failed to breed in the necessary strength of straw and neck, so that his rice would stand up under a heavy crop when there was wind and rain. Now he had come to talk to his daughter about this fresh disappointment.

The door of the cubicle closed behind him, and though Henry had formed a pretty good idea what course the ensuing conversation would take, some details of it escaped his intuition. Lavinia looked up with a smile from the papers on her desk and drew the extra chair which her father habitually used closer to it. He slumped rather than sat down in it and looked at her without speaking, dejection written in every line of his face and figure.

"I know," she said, trying not to show that she was herself dispirited. "It's terribly hard luck. I know you thought you were going to succeed this time."

"I did. And still the fields were flat as a pancake this morning. I don't mean that the crop's a total loss—a good part of it can be retrieved. But as far as my experiments go, it's a failure. Success is just another mirage like those we see so often on the prairie in dry weather."

"No, it isn't. You're getting nearer and nearer complete success all the time. You've succeeded in producing a crop that's

practically crystalline. That was your first objective—to get rid of chalk and shad. You've done that now. You can't do everything at once. Perhaps another year—"

"That's what your mother keeps telling me."

"Well, you're not going to admit that your womenfolk have more sense and more stamina than you have, are you?"

Her tone was one of gentle raillery. Lavinia no longer argued with her father, as she had when she was a rebellious schoolgirl. Maturity had brought with it a mellowness which she had lacked in youth.

"As you know, when we introduced Shinriki Japan, I thought that it would stand up under its grain," Brent went on. "It produced wonderfully on the newer lands that were free from grasses and red rice. But it was a slow grower and it lacked uniformity of grain. It wasn't standardized, it was made up of hybrids. You've told me over and over again that, when it came to milling, no two lots were alike."

"Yes, I have. But you've stopped planting Shinriki. You've been experimenting for some time now with those selections you secured from that crop grown by Captain Harrison, near Mermentau."

"Yes, and what have I got? All sorts of outcroopings and variations."

"You've got the crystal grain. And its due to your efforts that the last crop showed so much more general vitality than ever before. It seems to me that when we founded this partnership of ours, your main arguments were that I ought to remember what I had, instead of what I'd failed to get, and that, because I'd succeeded along certain limited lines, I could succeed along more extended ones."

Her tone was still one of gentle raillery and she still smiled. If the smile was a little sad, a little weary, at least there was no bitterness in it, and she looked steadily and calmly at her father.

"You're right, those were my arguments," he said. "And you're also right to keep reminding me I have got the crystal grain, I have made some general progress. But I get discour-

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aged more easily than I used to when I was younger. It's done me good to talk to you, Lavinia. Perhaps, as you say, another year—"

He rose slowly and stood beside her chair, looking down at her with loving pride tardily mingled with concern. "You put in long days, Lavinia," he said. "You must get very tired. Isn't it about time you went home?"

"I'm going presently. I still have a few odds and ends to clean up here. Father . . . I've been toying with a new idea lately and I've been meaning to speak to you about it. Have you ever thought of naming your rice?"

"What do you mean, naming my rice?"

"Well, it's always seemed to me so impersonal to speak about a variety of rice just by the name of the country it first came from. It's undergone all sorts of changes since then, anyway. But—well, take the case of Scotch oatmeal. It never had any real vogue in the United States until the manufacturers started calling it Quaker Oats. Then it began to sell like wildfire."

"I think I see what you mean," Brent said slowly. "So you think that, if—I mean, when—I get my ideal variety, we might give it some appealing name?"

"That's it."

"Well, it's something to think about. I will think about it. But I'm going home now—if I don't, you won't, either, and it's high time you did."

He bent over her, giving her one of his infrequent caresses. Then he went out of the cubicle, closing the door after him. As he walked across the bare floor of the clean rice department, Henry Blanchard, who was still at his roll-top desk, looked up and nodded. Brent Winslow nodded and said good night in return, but he spoke as if his mind were on something else, and he did not stop until he had reached the farther side of the office. Then he picked up one of the little blue sample boxes and stood looking from the shelf where these were ranged to the blue walls above them, before he disappeared from Henry's line of vision.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was a beautiful day, warm even for September, and Lavinia found it hard to keep her thoughts focused on the church service. She would have liked to sleep late Sunday mornings, since she was at the mill by seven every other day in the week, but the latest Mass was at nine-fifteen, so she did her best to shake off her somnolence; her children were still too young, in her opinion, to go to church unattended, though many other children, much younger, did so.

Ursin and Phares were waiting near the church steps to greet Lavinia and the children when they came out. This was their Sunday for visiting the Winslows, not the Villac-Primeaux', so the chat did not last long. But both men took time to tell Lavinia that she would find the best stand of rice she had ever seen when she reached her father's farm.

"An' not nothin' goin' happen to it this year, no," Phares added reassuringly. "Brent is fixin' to start cuttin' tomorrow, him, an' he bound to be finish' with it biffa' the weather changes, or either I'm a po' judge, me. Well, we got to be movin' on. . . . Nex' Sunday you comin' to us fo' true, Lavinia."

They parted with mutual and sincere expressions of good will; there was genuine affection between Lavinia and the members of her husband's family.

Lavinia's pleasant feeling of languor continued as they left the church and took the Parish Road out of Crowley. She had been just about Prosper's age, she reflected, glancing at him fondly, when she had first gone over this road; and in the twenty-odd years that had elapsed since then, the face of the countryside had changed completely. There were fewer trees—the wide stretches of woodland which had formerly bordered the bayous had nearly all disappeared. On the other hand, there

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were many more acres under cultivation, many more fences, many more drainage ditches. Brent now owned a whole section—six hundred and forty acres—and nearly half of this was planted to rice. They would see only a small part of the vast acreage on their way to the house, because much of it was on the farther side of the garden, beyond the orange grove, the watermelon patch and the orchard; but, as they left the Parish Road and turned into the lane Lavinia spoke.

"Prosper, look at that rice! Can you see any difference between that and the rice in Mr. Lowry's field, that we just passed?"

Prosper turned and surveyed the scene with a gravity that was rare for him. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I don't see any red rice in it. Or any indigo weeds. And it's taller. It looks more even, too."

"That's right. It hasn't any straight heads."

"I'd forgotten what they were called. But I remember now."

"I'll tell your grandfather at dinner how much you noticed. He'll be very pleased—just as I am."

Mary was standing at the garden gate, waiting to welcome them, and they all went into the house together. Brent rose from his measuring board and, as Lavinia had predicted, showed great pleasure at the news that Prosper had been so observant about the rice. He continued to talk to the boy about it while Mary and Lavinia put dinner on the table. In spite of their prosperity, the Winslows had retained their simple way of living and, on Sunday, had no outside help. The meal progressed in its customary quiet way and, as usual, the children rushed out the minute dinner was over. Brent went back to his measuring board and Lavinia helped Mary clear away the dishes. It was while they were doing these that they realized how dark it had suddenly become.

Mary glanced at the clock. "Why, it's only half-past three!" she exclaimed. "I thought it must be later, that we'd sat talking longer than we realized. And we were just saying that we couldn't remember a more beautiful September day."

"It isn't beautiful any more." Lavinia went to the door and was almost immediately caught up in a gust of wind. "I must get the children back to the house," she said hurriedly, over her shoulder. "I'm afraid we're in for a storm."

She ran into the yard, calling to Prosper and Anne Marie as she went. The swirling dust choked her and she coughed hard, trying to clear her throat and call more loudly. Her grandfather heard her and appeared at the entrance of his house, cupping his mouth in his hands and shouting to her reassuringly: the children were with him. She had better get under shelter before she was soaked to the skin. He had hardly finished his admonition when the rain began to fall with destructive force. A flash of lightning zigzagged in a fiery path from the zenith of the black sky to the dark horizon, and the thunderclap that followed instantly thereafter was deafening. Lavinia turned and started back toward the kitchen, bowing her head and fighting her way along. She had gone only a few steps when a door slammed and, to her amazement, she realized that her father was coming toward her.

"I'm all right!" she cried. "I'll get there in a minute. Please go back, Father!"

"Go back! I'm going *on*—on to see what happens to my rice this time!"

He had pushed past her and, despite the hard going, was out of the yard before she could stop him. Then, in a flash, it came over her that she must not try to stop him, that he was right; he had to see what was happening this time. Neither high winds nor pelting rain nor thunderbolts should keep him from his fields. If the rice were beaten down again, he was a beaten man. But if it were not!

Almost in the same moment Lavinia understood that she must not let him forge his way out to the field alone. She must go with him over this last hard mile; it was her fight, as well as his, their joint battle. Again she bowed her head and struggled forward, reaching his side just as he came to the field.

While the storm was at its height, Lavinia did not try to look

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at her father. Buffeted by the wind, blinded by the rain, it was all she could do to maintain her footing and to glimpse, intermittently, the drenched field. But when the fury of the elements slackened and she could stand securely and see before her, she turned toward him and reached for his hand. He seemed unaware both of her glance and of her touch. His eyes were fixed on the rice. Despite the wind and the downpour, its golden heads still rose, erect and triumphant.

His gaze continued steady; there was disbelief in it, then wonderment, then joy; but it remained unwavering. It was his mouth which betrayed the emotion he could not control. His lips were quivering, and his long silence was not wholly one of volition; it was physically impossible for him to speak. Lavinia was also deeply moved. This was a supreme moment in her father's life. The rainfall had ceased, the dark clouds were shredding away, and the wind had died down to a gentle breeze when he at last drew a deep breath and spoke.

"I must go in and tell your mother."

"Yes, of course."

"Won't you come with me?"

"No, I'd like to stay here a little longer, if you don't mind. The sun will dry me off in no time. It'll be shining in full force any minute now. Look! There's a rainbow!"

"So there is! If we were superstitious, we'd think it was an omen!" He hesitated. "Do you remember telling me that I ought to give my rice a name, the day I came to the mill so utterly discouraged, about a year ago?"

"Yes, have you thought of one?"

"I had my first inkling that same day, when I looked at the blue walls and sample boxes as I went out. But I couldn't seem to connect their color with anything that had much meaning—much symbolism. Now it's come to me. We've got what we thought was impossible after all, haven't we?"

"Indeed we have."

"All right. I'm going to tell your mother we have her blue camellia."

BLUE CAMELLIA

"Oh, Father, that's great! A great name for a great discovery!"

"You don't think it matters because we've found it in my garden, instead of hers, do you?"

"No, she'd rather have it that way. Do go quickly, Father, and tell her."

He needed no further urging. He was smiling now, thinking not only of his beautiful strong rice, but of the surprise and pleasure the name he had given it would bring to his wife. Lavinia watched him hurrying in the direction of the house and smiled, too. She had no wish to go with him. The presence of a third person, even their daughter, would be an intrusion on this meeting between husband and wife.

The rainbow was fading slowly, but the clouds massed on the horizon retained much of its radiance, and this radiance was reflected on the earth. Gradually, the clouds drifted away, too, leaving the sky as completely clear as it had been that morning—as clear and as blue as the imagined color of that mythical flower which was to be a symbol of their success. Blue Camellia! The name, like its significance, was perfect.

Yet it was not of her father's success or of the name that was to herald it to the world that Lavinia began to think as she stood alone, her gaze on the golden fields. These in themselves had become a symbol—a symbol of plenty with which to feed a hungry and needy world, a symbol of fellowship with all those people, hitherto alien to her, who were dedicated to the same great task as the one which she now saw clearly as her life's work. Henceforth, she would put into this work not only all the earnestness, all the intelligence, all the effort of which she was capable, as she had from the beginning; she would also put into it all the love which, in another direction, had gone unrequited, and for which she now saw a fulfillment greater than she had then envisioned. Her father's triumph had released her from the past. She would not withdraw from the world any longer. She would seek out her fellow workers, not only those who lived near by, but those on the other side of the globe,

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who labored on terraces and in paddies. She would learn what she could from them and teach them what she could in return. She would take the children with her and visit all those countries in South America which were still only names on a map and statistics in a book; she would go to Japan and to Java. These travels would bear no relation to those she had so desperately contemplated in the first days of her widowhood, when her one thought had been of flight, of escape. These would be undertaken in search of knowledge which she would share with those she found in the course of her happy wanderings, and then bring back with her to enrich the place which was her home. And she would be able to accomplish all this because at last there would be abundance instead of emptiness in her heart. . . .

She never knew how long she stood alone, pondering, with an ever-increasing sense of peace and compensation. But she was suddenly aware, for the first time since she could remember, of the longing and the need for prayer—a prayer which would be, at one and the same time, a petition and a thanksgiving. In the fading light, she sank to her knees and bowed her head. She needed no bell to let her know that, for her, this was the hour of the Angelus.

Onionhead

WELDON HILL



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

WELDON HILL is the pseudonym for a talented young writer who has published several short stories under his own name. To protect the privacy of himself and his family in the small Oklahoma town where they make their home, he chose to publish his first novel as Weldon Hill. It is, however, safe to assume that he served in the Coast Guard in World War II, and that he is presently working on his second novel.

ONIONHEAD—Weldon Hill
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PART I

Hunger

IT WAS THE fashion in those haunted days for a moneyless young male student to regard himself, publicly and privately, as doomed. Destined for nothing but misery and sorrow, it was required that he accept his gaunt prospects with a jaunty sneer and a hollow laugh. Live to the hilt, they told one another, for tomorrow may never come. But it seemed to Alvin Woods that about all any of his contemporaries at the University of Oklahoma did was sit around and talk about living to the hilt—and tomorrow, such as it was, persisted in arriving on schedule.

In America there was the grimly familiar economic depression; in Europe there was a raging frightening war. And nobody was really neutral. Not America. Not Oklahoma. Not the laughingly sardonic young men at the University who were at once intimidated and exhilarated by the thesis that the world, to misquote somebody they had read, ended with either a bang or a whimper.

Al Woods was generally in accord with this dismal philosophy, except that his subconscious mind persisted in associating Death with Malnutrition. He was nineteen, and then twenty, that year; he had never known anything but hard times as far back as he could remember. Two things obsessed Al: food and sex. He never seemed to have enough of the first, and he never seemed to have *any* of the second.

Al made a B-minus in math that year, but had an awful time balancing his budget. The basic equation had to do with food versus sex. Traditionally, you spent a dollar or so on a coed and then on the way home you moved in for the kill. More often than not your quarry eluded you, even after you had

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stalked her cautiously for several evenings in a row, and there was no consolation in the knowledge that you had bought your snares and bait at the expense of your stomach. All in all, that year was about as frustrating as any of the rest of Al's frustrating years. Always, inevitably, eternally, he was hungry, and by the time June rolled around and the tennis courts were aswarm with nubile girls in maddening shorts, his money had dwindled to nothing and it was time to go try to find some more.

Al headed for the wheat harvest. The kindly and obliging landlady, who had attractive legs for all her forty years, agreed to look after Al's scant belongings, including the portable typewriter he'd foolishly taken as security for a small cash loan in the previous autumn; and Al made a bundle of old clothes and started hitchhiking toward Kansas.

In the wheat fields they paid a man four dollars a day and fed great staggering dinners at noon. At least this was the way Al had heard it told.

But when he got to the grain country it seemed to him that every other male between twelve and eighty-five had had the same idea, and he suffered severe pangs from missed meals, and chigger and mosquito bites from sleeping on courthouse lawns, before he learned that if you stayed a few days behind the harvest proper you could get jobs plowing the stubble fields for as much as three dollars a day and keep. So Al drove the big Popping Johnnies around and around on the flat sprawling fields of wheat stubble that checkered the rolling bare plains stretching away endlessly under the hot blue, cloud-free skies like a golden ocean. And there was food. Three banquets each day. And there were no girls to torment him with their unavailable delights. At night his tired body rested, and his libido rested too. He had found true peace.

But it had to end some time, and by the last of July the ocean of stubble was all charted, and Al headed back toward the campus with sixty-one dollars in his pocket. Wiser this year than last, he meant to be on campus early and seek a meal job washing dishes, so that he need not use his money for his

stomach, but there would be no hiring of dishwashers until late August or early September, a month away. So Al set a course for Oklahoma City. He must eat a little in August, and it seemed to him a man who only wanted modest compensation should have no trouble finding some kind of stop-gap job in the city.

He found a cheap hotel which catered to poor business-college students. Then he began reading the want ads, and journeying afoot all over the city. After a week he was disheartened and eight dollars poorer, and it was a long time until September.

In the back of his mind, Al had been thinking for some time that he ought to go see his father before returning to the campus. He hadn't seen his father for a year, or heard from him since Christmas, when a card had come from a small town near Tulsa.

It required three days of hitchhiking for Al to track down his peripatetic father. He finally located Alvin Woods, Senior, barbering in a small community in the southern part of the state. A garrulous, hard-drinking, restless, migrant barber, Alvin "Windy" Woods welcomed his visitor with the customary loud and somehow, Alvin Junior felt, phony cordiality that was his hallmark.

"Well, I'll be a son-of-a-monkey's uncle!" Windy Woods bawled at sight of his only child. "Damned if it ain't old Hot-shot!"

And to celebrate, he knocked off work for the day.

AL AWOKE, sick and depressed the following morning on a pallet on the floor of a dingy furnished room, and reconstructed the events leading up to here. There had been, yesterday afternoon and evening, a series of beer joints, in each of which Windy Woods asserted loudly that this was his boy Al who was by way of getting himself a highfalutin' education over at the college in Norman, Oklahoma, in order that he

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wouldn't have to operate a pair of clippers for a living like his ignorant old man. All of which embarrassed Al acutely.

Lying there stiff and sore from the comfortless pallet, Al rejected whatever vague, half-formed ideas he might have had about letting his father support him until September. Being around his old man was a very depressing thing.

After breakfast he had his father go with him to a notary public to fix up a document giving written permission for Al to enlist in the Marines, a contingency Al had remotely entertained for some time. And then, with the paper in his hand, he was abruptly, urgently desirous of getting out of this town.

"Well, good-by, Pop," he said. "Behave yourself."

His father answered his weak grin with his own insincere, automatic grin. "If you do enlist," Windy Woods said, "you'll come see your old dad before you go off no tellin' where, I reckon?"

"Sure, Pop," Al said without conviction. "Well, I better get going."

He shook his father's thin, soft barber's hand and his father stared sadly past him and said with a kind of melancholy that had in it overtones of agony, "You gotta take care of your hair, Hotshot." Giving Al the memorable farewell phrase, offering his son all the wisdom he'd accumulated in fifty-two years of futility. Al nodded, sheepishly embarrassed, and took up his hobo bundle of clothes and went hurrying along the dusty sidewalk of the small town toward the open highway.

He had no definite plan, other than to go back to the campus and try to get a dishwashing job. He had no real hope; he knew he was defeated; his little hoard of money wouldn't enable him to pay fees and buy books. But he felt a compelling nostalgia for the campus, as if it were his home, and he would go there and stay there doggedly, as long as he could hold out. In the back of his mind he saw military service as a kind of rocky cushion to fall back on when all else failed. As a Marine, he would be fed and housed. But meanwhile, in Norman, Oklahoma, he knew the location of most of the good kitchen gardens

around the campus, and tomatoes ought to be ripe and plentiful now. A guy who liked tomatoes could make out for quite a while with little cash; there would be apples and other late vegetables to take up the slack, too. A guy could exist.

THE LANDLADY was washing clothes in the cool, dark basement when Al arrived. She gave him a smile of weary welcome. "You want your old room back, Alvin?" she asked him.

"Well," he said, "what I want is to pay a couple months' rent in advance, only not move in until September."

Her expression was puzzled, and in the attempted explanation he made known his poverty and confessed that he'd intended to sort of camp out like a gypsy until September. She scolded him and said he was to move right into his old room and not be silly. "You can do odd jobs for me until school starts," she said. "I've got so much to get done here—I'll be glad to have some help, and your hours worked can go on the rent." She sighed. "I'll be happy to have someone in this empty old house besides myself. It gets awful lonesome, nights."

He gave her a swift glance. What did she mean by that? He read all sorts of subtle nuances into her words. She was a childless woman whose husband was a journeyman construction worker, and his pursuit of a living took him all over the country, so that he was often gone for weeks at a stretch. The husband was gone again now, it developed, and Al felt that the landlady was probably starved for the warm intimacies of marriage. Here, then, was ripe, golden opportunity; here two gnawing hungers meeting in an empty house with no censor around to prevent a solution; here was the rich fruit on the tree of life, eager for the plucking. But Al didn't know quite how to shake the tree. How did anyone tackle a deal like that? With coeds you started out with horseplay, a stolen kiss, and progressed. But how did you arrange to steal a kiss from your landlady?

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Al took the whole subject under study, deciding to wait and see if maybe the landlady, to whom sex was a more familiar item, would make the overtures. He moved his gear out of storage and went to work for the landlady, mowing her lawn, painting porch furniture, helping her launder curtains and air bedding and scrub floors and move beds and furniture around in the hot, August-deserted house. Perhaps in the busy routine of their shared aloneness it never occurred to her that he was other than a high-minded boy. At any rate she never invited advances, and Al's own highly developed sense of self-preservation dampened his enthusiasm for the showdown—she might be indignant, instead of acquiescent, and boot him out of a pretty good deal. The work he did was light, and each noon the landlady gave him his lunch.

In the evenings Al poked around the almost deserted campus. He always carried one of the landlady's salt shakers with him, and after dark he raided tomato patches. Outside of lunches he had reverted to a strict vegetarian diet.

In late August, last year's students began drifting back to the campus, and new ones came, and the molten afternoons rang with music and shouts and laughter, and the landlady's husband came home for a few days, and that was that. Al berated himself for having hesitated too long. She didn't need him now. Shrugging, he accepted the new status and got on with his business of continuing to exist in the universe of higher learning without actually being a part of it.

During Rush Week he got a job washing dishes in a fraternity house, and registered for Selective Service, which had become the stern inescapable law of the land. And with a sense of irony he enrolled as a sophomore, although unable to pay his entrance fees.

Rusty, the frat brother in charge of the kitchen, was a large, jovial back-slapper with red hair and a booming extrovert's voice; a real swell democratic guy who made Al feel guilty and small-minded because he'd spent his entire Freshman year

laboring under the patently ridiculous impression that frat rats were all lousy snobs. Obviously he himself had been an *inverted* snob, as Josephine Hill once accused him. Jo was a sorority girl and very defensive about the "organizations." Actually, as Al could see for himself now, frat men were nice average people, once you got to know them.

Al was eternally alert for the big opportunity, and looked at girls with the rapt fascination tourists give to mountains and lakes and sunsets. He found the female body absorbingly scenic, and he spent a large part of his free time sight-seeing. One afternoon he was standing on the campus corner, engrossed in the passing phenomena, when a girl spoke to him.

"Why, hello there, Al Woods!" she said, and he turned to meet the shyly smiling glance of a thin, tall girl who wore glasses, had slightly buck teeth and a muddy complexion. He remembered her but couldn't put the name to her, so he grinned and said, "Well, hello. Imagine bumping into *you*."

"I wondered if you'd make it back this year," she said earnestly.

"By the skin of my teeth," Al said. "How've you been?"

"Oh," she shrugged. "Fine. Wrote a book this summer. Lousy."

"I lived a book this summer," Al said. "It was lousy, too."

She smiled uncertainly. "Have you heard from Jo lately?"

Al sobered. "Not since Christmas. She sent me a card. She *here*?"

"No, she's going to Southeastern this year," the girl said. "She says her leg still doesn't feel very good yet."

"Why, I always thought it felt pretty good, myself," Al said, and she giggled, and he began to get interested, the way he always sooner or later got interested in any girl he met. Because after all, maybe she was thin and no raving beauty, but the big important thing was undeniable—she was a girl. "Hey, look," Al said, "let's get together soon and talk about stuff, huh? Reminisce, like."

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"I'd love to," she said, and he said, "Tonight, maybe?"

"Why, yes; tonight would be peachy," she said. "Call me, huh?"

"Sure," Al said. Only he didn't know *what* to call her, he still didn't remember her name. "Well," he said, "I gotta be going. See you."

She nodded, beaming. "Al, I'm *glad* you're back this year."

"Ditto," he said, and they parted, and an hour later he finally remembered her name. Beulah Flachtter. Josephine Hill's friend and sorority sister. And then, having remembered Beulah's name, Al spent the rest of his labor period remembering Josephine Hill.

For a few hectic weeks in the previous autumn and winter he had been sick with love for Jo Hill, a democratic and popular sorority girl who was considered—by herself, as well as her acquaintances—to be very wholesome but enigmatic, an Interesting Paradox. As far as Al could discern, she was all that and more. Inscrutable, contradictory, and sometimes a little insane, maybe. She was certainly horse-crazy, maintaining her own private horse at a stable near the campus, and Al had spent some miserable hours shivering on a bale of hay in the dank stable while the girl "exercised" her mount. "I'll just take him for a ten-minute canter," she would say. "Be right back, Al." And then she would return an hour later, laughing and exhilarated and unrepentant. Sometimes he had suspected that her motive in dating him was simply to horrify her stuffy Pan-Hellenic sisters, who were very class-conscious and clung to the tradition that nice sorority girls just simply didn't go around with moneyless, shabby, crude "independent" or "unorganized" male students.

She liked to torment Al, too, and was always successful. She fascinated Al and cast a black magic over his mind. She had a creamy, flawless skin and an enchanting sprinkle of freckles across her short nose, and wide gray eyes, with thick, tangled black lashes, and crow-black hair. Her grin was wistful and somehow gave the wrong impression of vulnerability and deep

sadness, while her throaty, low-pitched voice was apt to break charmingly in mid-sentence.

In December she was riding with a couple of frat ROTC guys, showing off her horsemanship, and her horse slipped on an icy street and fell, breaking her left leg. Al went to the infirmary to see her, picturing himself comforting her in her unbearable pain, but the Greek boys were packed in a solid phalanx around her bed. He never did get to see her alone again—she went home to mend, and didn't return to OU for the second semester. Al wrote her once, but her answering letter was so trite and slap-dash and barren of sentiment—and so short—that it infuriated him, and he renounced the whole silly affair. When she sent him a Christmas card, he tore it up with cold disdain.

Well, that was all ancient history now, and he sure didn't ever intend to get mushy about any coeds again, especially snooty little sorority girls, and go through all that misery again. Take Beulah now, she was no *femme fatale*, she was safe. A guy could fool around with her and not get involved emotionally. If she intended to be a writer, what she needed was to taste life, and old virile Al Woods, master craftsman, would tutor this thin, unawakened artist in the fine art of living.

SOMEHOW Beulah got the impression that Al was hungry and broke, which was not far from the truth, and she kept trying to buy hamburgers for him, but his perverse pride made him refuse to accept anything from her except beer and coffee, neither of which was essential to his survival. Besides, he paid for his beer and coffee by listening politely while she read her short stories to him.

"You write with authority," he would lie. "I like your style. You are very articulate, Beulah. You're on your way, gal." Al shrewdly deduced that what any young writer wanted was not so much constructive criticism as praise, and he quieted his

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conscience with the thought that one should encourage budding genius.

But he was not really much concerned with her literary qualifications. Studying her intently, he would think, How would she be if aroused? Can she *be* aroused? Is she capable of hot-blooded, unrestrained love? You can't judge a woman by surface clues—there may be more to this girl than meets the eye. That's how it was with Al Woods. Sex was always loitering in the fringes of his mind.

As September moved away from August's heat, Al began to settle into a fairly contented routine. He was eating better than ever before in his life, except for the total absence of breakfasts. He attended classes when he felt like it, which was less and less often. He was consciously drifting with the tide, afloat on the slow-moving current of time. He dated Beulah two or three nights a week, stealing a chaste, tight-lipped kiss just often enough to get discouraged about awakening the happy natural animal in her.

In late September he had a second notice from the Registrar about his delinquent fees, and shrugged it off. Who were they kidding? It was embarrassing to attend classes irregularly, without textbooks, knowing you were unauthorized, a trespasser; this curt dunning notice simply caused Al to stop attending classes entirely. For that matter, he hadn't been making his morning classes anyhow, because he hated to go until noon without food. So all the Registrar's notice did, if you looked at it a certain way, was just to put an end to his feeling guilty about sleeping until noon.

The Draft Board had notified all the men students that they were being deferred until June, but of course this didn't actually apply to Al, since he wasn't technically a student and since he could not support himself until Christmas, let alone until June. In the rare moments when he gave any thought to the matter, he discovered in himself a strong aversion to the prospect of being drafted into the Army. He liked to walk, but not any twenty-odd miles a day with a heavy pack and rifle. He kind of

favored the Marine Corps, if it ever came to a choice, but there was no hurry about anything. Al found it pleasant to read until late at night and sleep late mornings, and he suspected this state of affairs would not be Marine Corps procedure.

September waned and died, and October began to paint the leaves, and Al sat up late reading and smoking the pipe that was his main solace and luxury outside of food and sleep.

And then one afternoon in the third week of that month Al watched a bright-clad girl coming toward him under the thinning trees and was abruptly turned to stone.

It was Jo Hill, or her ghost, sauntering along, boyishly scuffing and kicking among the windrows of yellow leaves. She seemed a part of the day, her yellow cardigan reversed in the current mode, her skirt a plaid of gold and brown and red. Jo, he thought, stunned. It's really Jo.

She saw him and came on, her face lighting up. "Well, dog-gone," she said, husky-voiced, grinning her vulnerable and touching grin. "Hello there!" she said. "Golly, I *hoped* I'd see you."

"Hello, Jo," he said, feeling clumsy and shabby. "I thought we got rid of you. What are you doing around this joint?"

"I hafta visit my dear sorority sisters, don't I?" she said. "Heck, Alvin, maybe I even got a little homesick for you, too. Anyway, when Beulah said you were back this year I sorta aimed to track you down."

He was skeptical, not believing she had really hoped to see him. This meeting was sheer accident, but he was achingly glad to see her.

"Still handsome in your brutishly appealing way, I notice," she said with a laugh. "Do you have a class or anything, Alvin?"

"You mean right now?" he asked. "No, I'm just loafing, Jo."

"Me too," she said. "I mean, I'm just being nostalgic. Gee, it's so lovely here now. I've made up my mind to transfer back next semester." She gave him a sudden fierce look. "Why didn't you answer my letter?"

"You call that half-page note a letter?" he said lamely.

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"I ain't much of a hand to write," she said. "Besides, I had a broken limb, remember?" She grinned mockingly, and abruptly took his hand and squeezed it. "Well, never mind, I ain't mad any more—I'm too tickled to see you again, I guess. Remember how we used to go walking in the woods? You wanta go for a hike, maybe?"

He was remembering that he'd kissed her in the woods, and he sensed that she was brashly aware of reminding him, and now he was made dizzy by the sight of her mouth, which was red and moist and generously large—and warm and sweet and clinging, he remembered. In short, she was still his cup of hemlock, boy; somehow she just happened to be the most alluring and desirable and unforgettable girl that Alvin Woods had ever met.

They walked across the golf course companionably, Jo briefing him, in her inimitable way, on all that she had done and seen and felt and heard and thought since last they discussed the universe.

They left the campus and walked south in the quiet afternoon. When they came to the bridge where, a year ago, they had always gone down the embankment to the belt of woods along the small creek, they turned down the path. And when Al took her hand she didn't try to draw it away.

They went on for another minute or so in silence, and when they came to the remembered grove of scarlet maples Jo stopped and Al took her in his arms and held her hard against him, smelling the poignantly familiar fragrance of her hair and skin, remembering all the times when he'd held her in his arms and felt this same melancholy and tender longing for her. Presently Jo sighed.

"How long are you going to be around?" Al asked. She said until the next morning. "How about tonight, then?" he said.

She pulled away and looked up at him. "Oh, gee, there's a formal thing at the house," she said with soft anguish. "I'd rather be with you. Honest. I'm really not a social butterfly. I mean, sometimes I am, but that's not the real me. The real me

has been missing you something awful, Alvin; the real me would rather be with you than almost anywhere." That *almost* had rough edges for Al. She always had to qualify things. "Gee, Alvin, I wish . . ." She sighed regretfully and he saw that she really was sorry about it. He put his lips against her forehead and said huskily, "You're here now, anyway."

With an impulsive gesture she held him there and twisted her face around and up so that their mouths met, and she kissed him deeply and hungrily and lingeringly. The slow deliberate kiss stirred them both strongly, and Al dizzily sensed her mood and her response. He felt her fingers digging into his back, and abruptly he lifted her in his arms and knelt, still kissing her, and put her down in a wind-drifted bed of leaves, the kiss uninterrupted, and now she began to respond even with a passion and lack of restraint he'd never before awakened in her, sharing and heightening his own urgency. But then, when it was almost too late, she tore her mouth away and said in sudden panic, "Oh, no . . . please! Al, we can't! We mustn't! Oh, please, *no!*"

With a part of his mind that had managed to remain detached Al realized she was genuinely frightened, terrified of the mindless force of her desire. He knew, too, that she couldn't stop him now and probably wouldn't really try to stop him, for it was her reason that struggled and cried NO. She wanted him as he wanted her, desperately, and he could do as he pleased, the decision was his alone to make. He didn't want to stop. But unreasonably, unbidden, he felt a rush of tender concern that was as strong as his passion, and was enormously aware of a feeling of obligation and responsibility. The war between conscience and desire raged briefly in Al, and then he groaned and said, "It's all right, Jo baby. Don't worry."

The sun was slanting far down in the west when they walked back together, cutting across the fields, very close and affectionate with arms around each other, stopping often to kiss with a kind of frustrated, gentle despair. Once, with her nose against Al's collarbone, Jo said thoughtfully, "I sort of feel like I belong to you now, anyway." Which Al translated to mean: I

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have a closer, warmer, *friendlier* feeling for you than before, and lots and lots of gratitude and respect and admiration and fondness. What she didn't say was: I love you, Alvin. She could have said everything he wanted to know with three well-chosen words, and that would have made him begrudge his chivalry less, but Jo wasn't a girl to use the word "love" carelessly.

At the corner of the ROTC stables they kissed for the last time.

"Alvin," Jo said solemnly, "I want you to know I am terribly, terribly . . . *fond* of you." She touched his cheek and looked at him for a long, grave moment. "Al, I'd like to just say . . . well, thank you. You're swell." Then she whirled and went racing away from him, so you'd never guess she'd ever had a broken leg, and he watched her go dumbly, with the beginning of desolation in his mind. She slowed to a walk; she turned back.

"Write to me, darn you!" she called.

He nodded, but his mind answered contrarily. Why write? What was there to write about? He remembered the trite, non-committal note she'd written him *last year*. He wanted her to write him long, emotional love letters, not pen pal notes. And she had been so careful, in her honest fashion, to avoid giving him the wrong impression that she might be in love with him. She was terribly, terribly *fond* of him, for God sakes.

FOR THE rest of his stay on the campus, the very air was haunted by Josephine Hill, and every reversed cardigan, every plaid skirt, every pair of saddle oxfords, hacked and stabbed at him with aching remembrance. And for a time he lost interest in his plan to seduce Beulah Flachtter. Since he had no other candidates lined up, it appeared he might as well start thinking about leaving.

But in the end he didn't actually *decide* to leave, he was more or less *driven* out of his academic refuge. The two notices

from the Registrar's office didn't influence his going one way or the other, except inasmuch as they made his status as drifting ex-student official. One notice bluntly informed him that since he had repeatedly ignored previous notices regarding his unpaid fees, he was now being officially dropped from all courses. However, he could request reinstatement, upon payment of the delinquent fees. The other notice stated that he had exceeded the maximum class cuts allowed for one semester, and unless he could show valid reasons for his inattendance immediately, he would be dropped from the class rolls.

Al didn't see Beulah formally for several weeks after Jo's brief return, bumping into her now and then on the campus but not interested enough to make any after-dark appointments. Then one day she telephoned and said she had a new story she'd like him to criticize. So he met her after supper at the beer joint. While he drank Budweiser, she read her story self-consciously. All of Beulah's heroines were elfin creatures with either peaches-and-cream or olive complexions, and bodies that were "tiny but voluptuous."

Al was glowering at his emptied fourth bottle when Beulah got around to the ending. When the authoress lifted her glance expectantly to his, Al said it was her best yet, and if the *Saturday Evening Post* didn't buy it they ought to be run out of Philadelphia and lose their mailing privileges. "Why do you waste your time working for a degree in English?" Al said. "You should devote full time to writing. You've got it, baby."

Beulah Flachttter startled him by not reacting the way she had always done before. This time she didn't blush and shyly look away; she looked him in the eyes and nodded her head thoughtfully. "I guess I shouldn't say it, but I really think I have matured, Al, and I owe a lot to you," she said gravely. "I feel tonight I'm a new being, Al; I have emerged from the cocoon in my work, and I'm on the threshold of . . . exciting new things. Life. The world." She sighed and smiled a soft smile. "Tonight, at last, I'm a woman."

All right, Al thought. Tonight I'm a man. Let's go.

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Halfway across the campus there was a sunken garden circled by shrubs and trees, and Al was impatient to get there, and when he reached the inky darkness of the shrubs he wasted no time, not wanting to risk having his aggressive mood dissipate the way it had so often before with Beulah. He stopped her and backed into a shadowed nook and took her stiff, thin body in his arms and began to kiss her, and continued to kiss her searchingly, demandingly, so that she was startled and alarmed at first, and struggled against him, and then was passive, and then eager, coming to the kiss helplessly, her arms stealing around his neck. What she didn't know, of course, was that Al wasn't kissing Beulah Flachter at all, but was in reality kissing all coeds, all the women he'd wanted and couldn't have, the entire total female of the species.

"Oh, Al, I love you so much!" Beulah moaned. "Oh, Al, don't you know I'm in love with you?"

Al was paralyzed; all passion fled, his lukewarm flesh chilled. Ye Gods above! he thought, appalled. She *means* it!

He could never remember clearly afterward how he had extracted himself from that horribly embarrassing situation. He had stammered some kind of abject apology and muttered something about being carried away in the excitement of the moment, and about how he thought too much of her to slur her good name and sully her honor and stuff like that. And in despondent silence he took her home, wildly trying to think of some eloquent, magic phrase that would keep her ego from suffering and remove the bad taste of his own conduct from his mind. And he didn't do too badly, either.

Across the street from her sorority house he gently took her shoulder and turned her around. "Let me explain," he pleaded.

She sighed. "Nothing to explain, Al. Skip it."

"Listen, will you? I could be in love with you, Beulah, but I've been fighting it. It wouldn't be fair to you, because—well, I've already enlisted in the Marines for six years and I got to leave tomorrow morning, see. I've got a kind of important appointment with fate, somewhere ahead. And tonight, well,

O.K., I wanted you. I wanted something fine to remember, over there. I was falling in love with you, but I didn't know you . . . I thought you *liked* me, sure, but hell . . . anyway, when you said it, all of a sudden I realized what I was doing, how it was all selfish and wrong. You're a wonderful girl, and I wish . . . well, that fate had been kinder to us." He sighed regretfully. "Forget me, Beulah—but allow me to remember you, the sweetest person I ever knew."

"Oh, Al," she said, weeping softly. "You'll come back."

She said she understood everything now, and it was too bad he had to leave so soon, and yet it was best that they part now, because tonight had taught her how dangerous their physical attraction could be. As for herself, she wanted to dedicate her life completely to writing for at least ten years, before she married or anything like that. Someday, perhaps, when he came back . . . but meanwhile, they would both be free. She sent him off to war with a moist, tragic kiss. "Good-by, Al . . . darling," she said shyly.

He ran wildly across the campus, yelling in his mind. It's always like that, he thought. Why couldn't it have been Jo? All his life it had been like that, the same old upside-down formula of Al Woods not getting what he wanted and not wanting what he could get.

And running insanely across the moonlit November campus, Al snapped the thin strand of false security and empty sentiment that had tethered him to the University. He couldn't stay any longer, not after that goddam lie about joining the Marines.

The next morning, the landlady wept a little and blew her nose when Al told her he was going off to join the Marines; she had, she said raggedly, come to regard him almost as if he were the son she'd never had, and she'd never forget him, or the good times they'd had in August when he was such a help and so much company to her.

Now that he was actually leaving, Al was itchily impatient to be on his way, and in his haste he nearly forgot the type-

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writer. He wasn't very clear in his mind about the typewriter's importance in his life—it seemed a foolish thing to take into the Marines with him, and it would be an extra burden. But, still, he felt he must have it. The portable typewriter was a symbol, like the College Omnibus he had not forgotten to tie up in his hobo bundle of belongings. They were both symbols of his brief matriculation at the University. They were diplomas of sorts, too, for anybody seeing him using them would at once discern that he could type and he could read.

BUT THEN between the interurban trolley station and the post office building in Oklahoma City, Al got cold feet. He dawdled, stopped for coffee, bought a newspaper, intently examined window displays, and eyed the passing women critically. In time he reached the post office building and forced himself to enter. He didn't have to *sign* anything. He could say he was just *thinking* about enlisting, shopping around for the best offer.

The Marine Corps recruiting office was there, to his right, and he moved along the corridor. When he came to the open doorway he took one quick look and hurried on. It seemed to him there was a whole platoon of oversized, tough-faced Marine noncoms in there, waiting to pounce on him. Stymied and nervous, Al wandered along the empty hallway, and presently found himself loitering before a recruiting poster showing a small, sleek white ship knifing cleanly through emerald seas under a high blue sky.

The legend over the white ship read: *Join the U.S. Coast Guard.*

The Coast Guard was not much known in Oklahoma. In fact, Al hadn't the slightest idea what the Coast Guard might be—something like the Border Patrol, he guessed. But he liked the ship in the picture. And he had been thoroughly buffaloed by the men in the Marine Corps office. So he went up several

flights of stairs and found the Coast Guard office, and it was staffed by only one man, a kindly looking, middle-aged chief water tender (who introduced himself as such without explanations; Al wondered how one tended water) who was reclining in a swivel chair with his feet on the desk and a pipe in his mouth.

"The Coast Guard," Al said, getting to the point. "Boats, huh?"

"Aye, matey, lots of boats," the old salt assured him amiably. "You like boats, matey?"

"Never been on one yet," Al confessed.

"You'd like 'em," the chief said mildly. "The Coast Guard is a good outfit, son. Opportunity to get ahead, plenty of travel. Man ought to make his third-class rating in one hitch easy, nowadays."

"What's the pay?" Al asked cautiously.

"Twenty-one bucks a month, same as the other services."

Al took a deep breath, remembering the big ominous Marines downstairs. "O.K.," he blurted. "I'll enlist in the Coast Guard, then."

The old chief put on his cap and leisurely escorted Al to a doctor's office down the street, and the doctor examined Al and reported him sound of wind and limb and clear of eye. Back again in the chief's homey office, Al signed the papers and the chief got him a room and gave him some meal tickets and said, "Amuse yourself until Saturday afternoon, when the next recruit cadre ships out for Dallas. In Dallas you'll be sworn in and sent on to boot camp in Algiers, Louisiana." Then the chief scowled a good-natured scowl and said gruffly, "Now, matey, you show up here on the dot of thirteen hundred hours—one o'clock to lubbers like you—Saturday afternoon, in prime, seaworthy condition. What I mean is, don't go and pick up a dose of galloping Chinese yingyang rot in the meantime."

He needn't have worried. Al spent the next two days eating up the meal tickets and his remaining cash, and sitting through

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double-feature movies.

On the train to Dallas with the rest of the twenty-man cadre, the solemnity of the thing hit Al, the finality of it. In all his life he'd been in only two states, Oklahoma and Kansas, and here he was on his way to far-off places and no telling when, if ever, he would return to his native state. He shrugged resignedly; he was no longer in charge of his itinerary; from now on he would go where he was sent. And it was a kind of exciting thing to be riding south on the Santa Fe with these other committed draft dodgers.

They lay over in the Texas city until Monday morning, when they were sworn in with other enlistees from the area. As soon as they had repeated the oath, the swearing-in officer stepped back a pace and scowled fiercely and barked, "You're in the Coast Guard now and in the future you will conduct yourselves as Coast Guardsmen. You will salute superior officers and address them as 'sir.' For the next three years you will live on a military schedule, you will learn to instantly obey orders and commands, you will learn seamanship, and some of you will even become competent seamen. At the moment you are apprentice seamen. You are raw recruits, which we call boots, and I assure you that you know nothing which will be of any value to you in this organization. Never forget that, men. Study hard, listen, learn, observe, and above all obey. Good luck."

A grizzled chief bosun's mate put them on the train for New Orleans, still in their civilian clothes, and issued a jackknife to each member of the group, which now numbered around forty recruits. Along with the knife went the stern admonition never to lose it. "Mates, you will need them knives many times ever' day you're in the Coast Guard. Them knives are a part of you. Them knives might save your life in an emergency, or the life of a shipmate. Men, never lose them knives, them knives is mighty important gear from now on."

In the days that followed, Al came to regard the knife as he did his typewriter: If he ever *did* need it, he had it.

The boot camp in Algiers was across the river from New Orleans. They hauled them from the railroad terminal to the

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camp through dripping rows of dark green waxen magnolia trees, and whenever they passed old tars who had already been in training a week or so, the veterans would howl, "Fresh meat!" And, "You'll be sorreeee!" All in all, the arrival was pretty disheartening, and was followed by a hungry waiting in the cold dusty supply warehouse, a hurried short-arm inspection, the issuing of sea bags and clothing, the long rainy itchy sweaty slogging march with their ammonia-smelling burdens, and the awkward, self-conscious settling into bunks and stowing of gear. Al decided, when he finally had time to relax, that he was unhappy and wished he had stayed at OU. He had been foolish to sign away his personal liberty for twenty-one bucks a month. The succeeding days were not calculated to change his mind.

The master-at-arms in charge of the barracks to which Al was assigned turned out to be, in boot camp patois, a "chicken bastard." An arrogant petty tyrant with a hateful, supercilious expression and a whiplash voice, the chicken bastard awakened his nervous charges in the morning by hurrying down the aisles between the rows of double-decker bunks blowing a bosun's pipe and waving a paddle and bawling threats. On his second rapid tour of the big sleeping room he used the paddle on the bare thighs or buttocks of tardy risers and taunted them with his cocky, scornful laugh. He was instantly and heartily despised by all the new men.

The second day they stenciled names on their gear and learned about swabbing decks and soogying bulkheads and sweeping down fore and aft, how to make bunks and how to wear the white hats square on their heads. Also they were given their first taste of calisthenics, and short, unbecoming haircuts at the base barbershop. Al found himself an anonymous member of a marching group known as Company Q, which had the distinction of being last in line for chow.

And all day there was the marching. Hup toop thrip forp, hup tup three four, walk down yonder and to the rear march and come back up here and left oblique over that way and company halt about face, march.

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While he learned to march and tie bowlines and feather an oar and wigwag a few simple one-syllable words, Al absorbed various bits of information about the Coast Guard. It was America's oldest seagoing military outfit, starting out originally as the Revenue Cutter Service, and had absorbed a couple of other services along the way, including its recent annexation of the Lighthouse Service, and it now operated patrol cutters, ice breakers, buoy tenders, picket boats, troop-transport ships, stationary lightships, weather ships, lighthouses, and a great number of shore stations. Al had no particular preference, but rumor had it that the transports were rugged duty, especially during landing maneuvers.

One morning during a brief respite his platoon was sprawled in the shade of a magnolia, and a squat, tough-talking, ugly fellow named Berger leered at him and snarled, "How long you been inna Coast Guard, guy?" Al, although somewhat repelled by Berger, added in his mind and replied, "Eleven goddam long miserable days."

"I outrank yuh," Berger said scornfully. "I'm in *twelve* days."

"Listen," Al said wearily, "*everybody* outranks me, buddy."

That was the monstrous indignity of military life. There were about sixteen or seventeen plateaus of authority in the Coast Guard, and everybody on every level above apprentice seaman was his boss, it seemed. He was the very lowest form of military life.

"I wanna go home, fellows," someone said plaintively, and Al recognized the voice of a slender, handsome, too-amiable guy named O'Neal, who treated everything as a joke. O'Neal, Al opined, was one of those smart alecks who always wanted to be the life of the party.

WHEN THE quarantine period ended, Al's company was allowed to make its initial reconnaissance trip to New Orleans. He was roused out of his dissatisfaction with the course

of his life by the prospect of visiting the city. In his pocket he had half a month's pay, amounting to the munificent sum of nine dollars and fifty cents after deductions for having his uniforms altered to a near fit, and the price of the crock haircut he hadn't wanted in the first place. He would not be able to sample many of the rich tourist attractions of Canal Street, but he could see the sights and feel a brief sense of freedom. And in the back of his mind was always the thought that conceivably, he might be able to remedy the exiguousness of his love life. He had heard the boys mention a place called Baronne Street.

He had elected to explore New Orleans alone. By now he knew a good many of the men in his company by name, but as yet he had not formed any friendships. Other men of the company had begun to form attachments and buddy up, like Berger and O'Neal, for instance—as unlikely a duo as Al could imagine, offhand—but Al was in a passive frame of mind and made no effort to be gregarious.

On the ferry heading for New Orleans, unaccountably he found himself in the company of these two for whom he certainly had no fondness. From almost the first day, they had been persistently gravitating into Al's orbit; squat, tough-mannered Berger with his cynical eyes and mockingly sarcastic voice, which grated on the ear, and the handsome, comical, too amiable Harry O'Neal, who laughed when the situation was unfunny, and who combed his hair too often and too painstakingly. Now they seemed determined to join him on this first liberty as Coast Guardsmen, and he was too diffident to let them know how he felt.

"Ain't yuh seasick yet, Okie?" Berger wanted to know.

"Not yet," Al said and shrugged. "How far will nine bucks go in a town like New Orleans?"

"Hey, yuh jerk, don't worry about dough," Berger snarled. "Me brudder in Cicero sent me a bale of lettuce. When ya wid me yuh don't need to worry bout money, Okie. Be my guest, ya jerk."

Maybe I had this guy wrong, Al thought wonderingly.

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They walked up Canal Street purposefully, anxious to get out of the lower section that was off limits to boots. They came to a bar and O'Neal said, "Let's just step into this here s'loon, men, and oil up the old artillery."

In the bar, O'Neal ordered rum-coke, and Al, not wishing to appear ignorant although from a prohibition state, followed suit.

"Double rye," Berger snarled. "I ain't no goddam sissy."

I'll have this drink, then I'll excuse myself, Al decided. It was pleasant in the bar, especially in contrast to boot camp. The drink tasted fine. The music was nice, and it was only the middle of the afternoon. Time unlimited, he thought. No hurry. I ought to let that Cicero gangster pay for a couple more drinks.

"Okie," O'Neal said loudly, "as soon as we bankrupt this tenement dweller from the Chicago slum district, let's you an' me go find us a brace of them quadroons I read so much about."

"Watch ya langwidge, yuh Cincinnati punk," Berger said darkly. He dug an elbow into Al's ribs. "Youse is wid a big-time operator, kid, don't listen to dat penny-ante bum. He's so cheap he cuts his own hair."

"Bartender, I believe I'll have a whiskey sour," O'Neal said.

Al tried his first whiskey sour. It was sour. "I'm paying," he said, digging his money out of his pocket. But Berger was indignant, even bellicose. "Don't insult me," he said. "I told ya, I'm loaded. Dis is my party, see. Put ya dough away, Okie, ya jerk."

Al put his money away. He felt rather good. Rather good, boy.

"At's it, cop wise fer a change," Berger said. "Hey, bud, give us a round of dem double ryes," he snarled at the barman.

"Hamburger, what did you used to do?" O'Neal asked.

"Go ahead, get nosy, jerk," Berger said dangerously. "I'll have me mob bump ya off. Ya might get ya juggler vein split." He bellowed with laughter and dug an elbow into Al's ribs. "Wanta know wot I done in de old days, kid?"

"Not especially," Al said. "I mean, I ain't nosy."

"Ever'body's nosy," Berger snarled. "I drove a goddam truck. Beer truck. I had it good, but dat goddam draft board was fixin' to louse me up so I'm down here for me health."

"I'm a barber by trade, myself," O'Neal said absently.

"A barber!" Al said.

Berger laughed cynically. "A lousy wig trimmer. How bout dat?"

As the afternoon wore on into evening, Al somehow couldn't get over his disappointment in O'Neal's choice of profession. He tried his first sauterne wine, his first Tom Collins, his first brandy. The conversation revolved around the subject of women and Berger seemed well informed. Al listened, learning, and stared at the spectroscope that kept flashing before his unfocused eyes. "Berger," he said heavily, "if that is your name, which I doubt, tell me something—do you talk like that on purpose, like a dead-end kid?"

Berger looked hurt. "Wot's wrong wid how I talk, ya crum?"

"You got a strange accent," Al said. "It sounds phony."

"Lay off, Okie, he can't help it, he's from Cicero," O'Neal said.

Al studied O'Neal intently, not seeing him clearly. "Got a few questions I'd like to ask you, too, you cute barber you."

"If you ast me, you don't talk so hot yuhself," Berger snarled.

"Barber," Al said thickly, "how come you're a barber? It doesn't take *intelligence* to be a barber." He hiccupped. "You don't have to know very much."

"I'm as intelligent as you are, that's for sure, Okie. Look, you stuck-up jerk," O'Neal muttered, "I happen to be a good barber, with a license. I know all about barbering. I can look at a swell-head like you and predict if he's gonna get bald in the future or not, which is more than you can do."

Berger looked interested. "Is he?" he asked. "Is he gonna?"

O'Neal nodded triumphantly. "He is, I am happy to report."

Berger chortled, then looked worried. "Hey, how 'bout me, pal?"

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"Not you, pal," O'Neal said tenderly. "Not you. Just *him*."

Berger inspected Al with hard-eyed scorn. "One t'ing I can't stand it's a ball-headed college boy. Blow, Okie."

"Yeah, take a walk," O'Neal said coldly, "You bore us."

Al frowned at the spectroscope swirling in his vision, and hiccupped. "I happen to be a customer in here. I got a right to stay." For a moment he had a tendency to weep, but he quickly regained control and ordered a Martini. "Heavy on the olive," he said. He did not like the taste. Not enough olive, he thought.

"Who wrote 'With rue my heart is laden,' wise guy?" he demanded. They ignored him. "Housman, just for your information." He studied the bartender. "Sir, am I being obnoxious?" he asked.

"You're trying to be," the barman said. "You'll make it yet."

"What is your personal opinion of Cincinnati barbers, sir?"

"I like everybody," the bartender said patiently. "Even you."

"If I get obnoxious," Al said earnestly, "let me know, will you?"

"I'll send you a post card," the barman said wearily.

Al fell into a brooding silence except for the steady hiccups, staring with deep melancholy at the blurry bottles behind the bar. He didn't feel well at all. He had a sensation of going up and down rapidly in an elevator. "The thing is," he said to nobody in particular, "I am from Oklahoma, which is a dry state. I'm not used to drinking this kind of stuff. I think I am going to vomit or something." He got off his stool carefully and put a hand over his mouth and stared at the bartender in distress, his insides heaving and churning.

Berger grabbed his arm. "Come on, ya bastard," he snarled disgustedly, and he led Al back to the men's room and stood by while Al unloaded the incompatible contents of his stomach.

THE MONDAY Al's company had been scheduled to get bayonets for their rifles they were abruptly assigned to duty

in the mess hall instead, without explanations. Most of them griped in the traditional recruit fashion, but they knew that this was a speeding-up of their training and meant they would be shipped out sooner than they had expected; all the preceding companies had drawn mess-cook duty the last week of their stay at Algiers.

Al felt that mess-cook duties were vastly preferable to the interminable dry-throated sore-footed marching and the boring classes in knots, signals, regulations, and nautical idiom. Mess cooks ate better, and there were lazy breaks between meals.

The commissary steward, no doubt impressed by Charley Berger's belligerent cockiness, put him in charge of the dish-washing machine, and he selected Al and O'Neal as members of his crew. They knew each other better now, and Al was amazed that he'd ever thought of Harry O'Neal as either conceited or smartalecky. O'Neal was a good guy and an amusing character who could always cheer you up. As for Berger—well, he was Charley Berger.

When the company rated liberty, the three of them went to New Orleans together without discussing the matter. Harry O'Neal, it turned out, was a married man. Berger would drink with the other two for an hour or so, growing increasingly fidgety, and eventually begin nagging his friends to go with him to the flesh markets.

"I'm a clean-livin' married man," O'Neal would say, and Al would say ominously, "You keep on going down there, Hamburger, and you'll wind up with lingering leprosy."

Al wasn't tempted by visions of delight in the honeyed middle of the night. His customary excuse was that he was being faithful to his sweetheart back in Oklahoma. When he said this he always thought of Josephine Hill, whom he never expected to see again.

With the libidinous Berger gone, Al and O'Neal would settle down to a leisurely and economical evening ashore, drinking beer and strolling down Canal Street on the alert for pickup girls. For although Harry was considerate of his wife, he had no

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objections to casual romance. And he had a knack for it. Usually, when they found two girls together, one would be very pretty while her companion would compliment her by being utterly plain, if not downright dowdy, and it was tacitly understood that the guy who effected the introductions had first choice. So it usually transpired that O'Neal acquired a handsome companion, while Al found himself stuck with a drab creature of the Beulah Flachter type who was no threat to his moral purity.

Working at the hot, sweaty, greasy dishwashing machine that last week in boot camp, the three friends often wondered aloud about their future, and O'Neal always expressed the wish that they could stick together. Al agreed, but with the mental qualification that if he didn't start getting slightly more ravishing women, this stagnant old custom of double-dating would have to cease, boy.

On Sunday evening the company was relieved of mess-hall duty and given liberty until Monday morning muster, and since it was to be their last visit to fabulous New Orleans, Al and O'Neal and Berger had a farewell banquet and went on a seafood binge. Berger tried to persuade his buddies to cap this feast by glutting themselves on the delights of Baronne Street, but they maintained a steadfast attitude of moral rectitude, and finally, contemptuously, he hurried off.

Shortly thereafter, Al and Harry encountered a pair of dusky Cajun girls of tender age who looked like sisters and spoke a delightful patois and were enthusiastic about dancing, drinking, and necking. Al proposed to his girl six or seven times, and was very melancholy about leaving New Orleans now that he had finally found the one big overwhelming love of his life. Around three o'clock in the morning he kissed Simone good night and goodby, and accompanied O'Neal back to camp in wordless sorrow.

It seemed to his groggy brain that he'd barely dozed off when the master-at-arms came tootling down the aisle. The weight of his weariness pinned him down, and he was still abed when the scowling M.A. came hurrying on his punitive second round.

Whack! The paddle descended on Al's bare thigh, shocking him completely awake. Crack! the paddle said a second time as Al contorted violently. It was the first time this debasing discipline had caught up with Al, and he was enraged. Reacting without thought, he vaulted off the bed and launched himself at the leering M.A. His shoulder smashed into the paddler's chest and drove him into a tier of steel lockers with a loud crash, and the M.A. flopped to the deck. Al ripped the paddle from his grasp and smashed the paddle into splinters against the lockers and dropped the fragments to the deck as the M.A. scrambled shakily to his feet.

"O.K." the M.A. gasped. "You're in trouble, boot."

"*I'm* in trouble!" Al snorted, and went pacing slowly toward the fellow, who promptly began retreating down the aisle—until he bumped into Charley Berger, who shoved him toward Al.

"Come on, ya ain't quittin', are ya, pal?" Berger asked with snarling solicitude. "Show us how tough ya are, pal. You wouldn't run from no *boot*, pal—hell, ya a big man around here, M.A.; ya don't hafta take nothin' off us boots. Go on, M.A., show us ya muscles."

And O'Neal was there, too, grinning. "Hell, fellows, let's just kill the creep," he said.

"Yeah, leave us t'row him out duh goddam window," Berger said.

"O.K.," the M.A. whined. "All you three guys is in trouble, now. I'm puttin' you three guys on report." He pointed an unsteady finger at Al. "You gonna draw some brig time for hittin' *me*, boot."

O'Neal laughed merrily. "Hell, let's *all* do brig time," he said, and he gently slapped the M.A.'s face. "That's for all the mornings you came strutting in here with that silly paddle. *Now* report me, you penny-ante dictator. My name is Harry O'Neal. I'm an apprentice seaman."

Berger caught the M.A. by the shoulder, whirled him around, and twisted his nose. "At's fer bein' such a jerk, ya jerk," Berger snarled. "Me name is Charley Berger. Ya want me to spell it fer ya?"

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"You can go now, M.A.," Al said. "Go tell the C.O. you made the mistake of hitting a dumb boot named Alvin Woods with your paddle."

Every man in the barracks was there now, encircling the four principals, eyes avid, grinning with delight. The M.A. looked around at his erstwhile victims, and then he went scuttling toward the door. He didn't look back.

Al sighed. "O.K., you dumb jerks, you had to buy in."

"We'll beat duh rap," Berger said scornfully. But he refused to meet Al's glance, and O'Neal's expression was rueful and contemplative. Cooling off, Al was worried and apprehensive, but he couldn't worry away a warm triumphant feeling and a strong sense of affection and comradeship for Berger and O'Neal. They had deliberately assumed part of the trouble he'd got himself into—and it was undeniably a serious thing to lay hands on a petty officer.

He went through the motions of washing up and dressing and tidying his bunk, and then it was time for calisthenics and loping around the drill field, and then it was time to march to the mess hall. Any minute, any second now, the summons would come, he thought; he wondered if whoever came would be armed, if they would handcuff him.

Nothing happened during breakfast, or after breakfast. At the signal to muster they fell in at the drill field and waited, the entire company silent and expectant. The chief quartermaster and Seaman Leggas appeared.

"Men," the chief said in his friendly baritone, "you're shipping out today. You have four choices of assignment. Some of you will go to Philadelphia, some to Boston, some to Chicago, and some to Hawaii. As far as it's possible, you'll be allowed to pick your assignment. I'd suggest you pick an alternative preference. Leggas has four rosters; the company is dismissed for thirty minutes, so you can think about it and discuss it with your buddies. When you decide, Leggas will be at the mess hall with the lists. Go there and sign up. Dismissed."

Al and Berger and O'Neal walked along in moody silence until Berger said, "Well, where ya wanta go, youse guys?" As if

they were going anywhere but the brig, Al thought; he shrugged and said in a desultory way that Hawaii sounded all right. "Aw, I mighta figured ya'd say that, ya sap," Berger growled. "Look, t'ree fort's of dis company's gonna sign up for Hi-wah-ya, an' already dere's millions of soljers an' sailors already in dem islands. Go where dere ain't so much goddam competition."

"Philly is where they crew up the transports," O'Neal said. "Hell with *that*. Boston's a Navy town. So what's left?"

Berger leered. "Chicago, me old home town, dat's what's left. At'sa first choice wid me an' any other dumb bastard wid any brains."

Al and Harry looked at each other, shrugged. And signed up for Chicago.

They weren't swift in administering harsh discipline, it seemed; they procrastinated, they stalled. After noon chow the chief read off the lists of men assigned to each of the four travel pools. Only six men were going to Chicago, but three of these were Al, Harry O'Neal, and Charley Berger.

"Cicero, get excited, here I come," Berger snarled happily. "Chi, ya wunnerful boig ya, I'm comin' home!" He said this at least fifty times while the three of them sat on their mattress rolls waiting for the trucks to come for them, and each moment scanned the vicinity for belated S.P.'s to come drag them off to a general court-martial. The trucks arrived, and they loaded their gear and clambered aboard, and Al couldn't bear the eternity of dangerous waiting until the truck began to move.

But they got through the gate unchallenged, and they achieved the train unapprehended and headed north, away from cruel justice, and Charley Berger sighed, his tough, ugly face twisting into a grimace of cynical rapture, and snarled, "We made it! Don't tell nobody else, ya jerks, but I figured we was gonna wind up in Portsmouth, not ole Shy." And O'Neal gave a shaky laugh and wiped imaginary perspiration from his brow and said, "Somebody musta lost the subpoena, but we're sprung. What happened, I bet, they just didn't have time to do anything because it only happened this morning."

Al thought that was a fairly close guess, but he had a better

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one. Since it *was* the last day, and the M.A. would have fresh boots in the barracks as of tomorrow, the M.A. had been reluctant to spread the news that he'd been spanked by his own paddle.

I'm a sailor, Al thought with pleased astonishment. A tar, boy. And Chicago ahead. O.K., Chicago.

The trip north was marred by only one minor detail. In New Orleans' semitropic clime they had somehow forgotten that it was now December. But it was December, and 1940, when they detrained in Chicago, and they were welcomed by the numbing, whiplash blasts from Lake Michigan.

Al didn't believe Lake Michigan. The bitter wind howled in from a huge tossing gray wilderness of water, and he said, astonished, "What is that?" Berger regarded him with disgust and incredulity, and said Lake Michigan, ya dumb college student. He said it pityingly, and Al shrugged and mumbled that he'd forgotten it was so close to Chicago, and the six newly minted sailors were hustled into a waiting truck and taken to the District Office.

And then, with stunning suddenness, they were split into pairs and reassigned, and before he had a chance to say good-by or shake hands with O'Neal, Al was whisked away with Berger, destination unknown. Shivering and depressed, Al sat stiffly in the truck cab and listened to Berger interrogate the driver. "Surf station," Berger said, elbowing Al. What's a surf station? Al wondered, weighing Berger against O'Neal and feeling guilty because, when you came right down to it, he'd much rather have been paired off with O'Neal.

PART II

A Cook for the *Skedeelia*

A YEOMAN, third class, was in the station office when the two new men reported in. "Hmmm," he said gravely, "Rooms all full up, guess you'll have to bunk in the attic."

He showed them to the dusty, cluttered attic room that held four empty cots, a litter of lines and ropes and bales of rags, buckets of paint and wax, stacks of lye soap, brushes, mops, brooms, and an assortment of boxes and crates.

Al tied his sea bag to the foot of one iron cot, unrolled his mattress, and made up the bed. He shoved his typewriter under the bunk and sat down, feeling weary and lost and forlorn, and watched Berger finish his chores and then stretch out on his bunk. "Wot a crummy joint," Berger remarked.

Feet pounded on the stairs and a middle-aged, bleak-faced man came stumping into the attic. "I'm the C.O. here," he snapped. "Get on your feet!" They scrambled to their feet and watched him warily. "There will be no lying on your tails around here," the C.O. bawled. "Get into your dungarees and get topside to the lookout tower and start learning your duties around here. Nobody loaf during work watch. I put in fourteen to sixteen hours a day myself and by God so will you. This is not a beach resort and you are not fat millionaires on vacation; try to pull the wool over me and I guarantee I'll make you wish you had friends in Washington!" Abruptly he went stomping angrily across the floor and down the stairs, leaving Al and Berger frozen in their tracks, eying each other with consternation.

"What did *we* do?" Al quavered.

"We jerned de goddam Coast Guard," snarled Berger.

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They changed into dungarees and turtleneck sweaters and found the lookout tower, and the seaman on duty up there showed them the routine, the clock-punching, the alarm button to be used when somebody phoned in a drowning or boat trouble that required the Coast Guard's assistance. "Be sure you get the location right or the old man will rip your ears off, he's a ravin' maniac," their tutor said gloomily. "After you sound the alarm you yell down to the guys where an' what's the matter. Ever' fifteen minutes you make a round on the catwalk an' check the lake for sailboats or fishin' boats in trouble, only there ain't hardly no boats out there now on account of the ice. The main important thing is punch that clock or the old man will boil you in oil the rest of your enlistment."

"Nuts," Berger said toughly. "How's de chow here, bud?"

"Lousy," their informant replied bitterly. "It's garbage."

They soon learned that he had lied—the food wasn't that good. The cook was a seaman, second class; the job was either a form of punishment or a sinecure handed out to favorites, Al wasn't sure which. But he was certain that the seaman was an atrociously bad cook. I wish they'd either shoot him or me, Al thought.

For several days Al mistook the three surfmen for ominously powerful men only slightly less sinister than the C.O., but finally one of them put him straight about that. Surfman Mahoney was a pleasantly stolid, shy-mannered fellow who went about his duties silently, and when he found it necessary to give an order to Al, he always winced at Al's automatic "yessir." "You don't hafta call me sir," he said. "I'm only a surfman." Later Al learned that "only a surfman" could have been translated to: one of the most courageous, highly skilled, and underpaid small-boat sailors in the world, rare master of the specialized craft of the service, picket boats, lifeboats, and on down to skiffs. (And, in time, landing barges and other invasion craft.) In the foulest weather imaginable, the surfmen unhesitatingly leaped into their puny boats and went out onto the ice-choked, storm-lashed lake to rescue foolish yachtmen and fishermen, or sur-

vivors of bigger boats in trouble. Despite this ability and courage and responsibility, the surfman's authority was sometimes ambiguous, his rank ill defined, and his pay that of a third-class petty officer.

As the Christmas season approached, Al thought about his father, and about Jo Hill. Christmas had never meant much to him. Last year, Jo Hill had sent him a card, which he had torn up in a jealous tantrum. He decided that he would send her a nice costly yuletide greeting this time, and a card of some kind to his father, just to let the old boy know his whereabouts. The novel idea persisted, and when he got liberty he brought it to fruition.

Several days before Christmas the mail brought a modest card from his father, with a postmark indicating the barber had made one more futile transfer in his perpetual flight from himself.

But there was no word from Jo. Christmas Eve came and the C.O. and his bright, chipper wife joined the men in the dining room and they had eggnog and sang carols. Everything was going fine when the alarm started squawking and the C.O. and surfmen took off in the picket boat to rescue a foolhardy small boat trapped in grinding floe ice somewhere in the black cold night. They had not returned when Al fell asleep, and in fact the picket boat didn't get back until daylight. Such was the life of a surfman, and there were treacherous times when Al felt a small flicker of pride in being a part of the Coast Guard. Not, of course, like the hard, arrogant, virile pride of a Marine, with his tradition of fighting guts and durability, but a *sort of* pride anyhow.

And on Christmas Day he had trouble remembering how brutish and psychopathically tyrannical the C.O. really was, for the warrant sat with his men and ate heartily of the turkey and trimmings fixed by his cheerful wife; he even engaged in clumsy banter with Mahoney and Berger and others who weren't scared to open their mouths. But the *pièce de résistance* came later, after the table had been cleared, when with no fanfare or warn-

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ing the C.O. sat down at the battered old upright piano some philanthropist had donated to the station and began to bang out creditable ragtime jazz. Al was astounded. A warm sense of fellowship invaded the room and penetrated even Al's tough defensive armor.

IT WAS the middle of January when the C.O. established the cooking school at the station. The Cooks and Bakers School at New London, Connecticut, could no longer turn out chefs fast enough to fill the increasing needs of the mushrooming Coast Guard. When the officer from the district came to the station and explained about the cook-striker classes and asked for volunteers, Al had just spent a miserable morning scraping paint in the full blast of the winter winds. He knew that it was warm in the kitchen, and a cook had ready access to choice morsels in the pantry. So he volunteered for the cooking school, little knowing as he stepped forward that he was walking toward his natural and inevitable destiny.

Berger volunteered, too. He was a creature of impulse, and his impulse was to stay warm and well fed, and earn better wages.

The following day a fat, pasty-faced, pompous man arrived in a truck and unloaded his gear and announced in a rich Teutonic accent that he was Adolph Wollager, toid-class cook, come to tutor the strikers. He was, it turned out, not a very good cook himself. Furthermore, his methods of teaching the culinary art struck Al as being a little too painstakingly basic. Wollager believed a man must learn to crawl before he could learn to walk, and must become an expert pot-washer before learning the rudiments of using the pot.

"Everybody knows cleanliness is next to godliness, Wollager," Al said. "Fine, leave us be neat. But when do we start *cooking*?"

Wollager gave him a look of moist reproach. "You shut pee

observing vot I do all de time, Alfin. Vatch effery ting, memorice—den zomday you vill pee able to do it too. You learn like me, zee.”

That was his theory of teaching. Al had a different theory: You learned by doing. “Why don’t you let us *cook* something sometime?” he would snarl impatiently. Teacher and pupil were from opposite schools of theory, they were not compatible, and daily the rift between them widened.

Along toward the second week of matriculation, a brand-spanking-new third-class cook was bunked at the station temporarily while awaiting orders, and he elected to monitor the course. His name was Ralph Wildoe, but he said everybody called him Red. He was short, pudgy, pink-haired, pompous, scornful, and infuriatingly superior. He had just come from New London, where he had spent several months in the Cooks and Bakers School.

Teacher and pupils were mutually relieved when Wildoe got orders to go to Milwaukee and join the *Skedeelia*, a buoy tender. He came to say good-by and scatter a few derisive taunts in parting. “*Bon voyage*, you scholars,” he said. “I sure hate to leave, just when I was beginnin’ to pick up all this new stuff Wollager’s teachin’. You experts better hope you don’t git sent to a ship. You wouldn’t last a week on a ship. If they send one of you geniuses to *my* ship, you won’t last long enough to unpack your sea bag.”

“Aw, blow it, ya crummy jerk,” Berger said, but Al sighed and scowled and said, “Hell, the guy’s right, Charley, we’re sure not learning a thing about cooking.” And Wollager, overhearing this deprecatory aside, looked at Al with moist, pink resentment, his eyes albuminous. “*You* don’t learn someding, dot’s ride, Alfin Voods—you tink you alretty know efferyting.”

On Tuesday in the second week of February the C.O. came pussyfooting into the galley, looking fiercely upon the busy antiseptic scene, and asked in his usual harassed howl, “Who’s ready to ship out, Wollager?”

“Ass a shib’s gook, surr?” Wollager asked, astonished. The

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C.O. said that was the gist of his meaning, and Wollager's eyes slid around to Al. Alfin Voods, the rebel, the know-it-all, the dissident critic of the curriculum. "Voods," Wollager said unctuously. "Dot Alfin Voods, he is retty, surr." He giggled triumphantly.

Al felt trapped, and he lifted his voice in prompt protest. "Cap'n, I can't cook," he said frantically.

Wollager chuckled obscenely. "He is yust modest, surr. Voods iss vonderfully intellichent and enerchettic. He iss my *most retty stootend*."

"Pack your sea bag, Woods," the C.O. said. "You're going aboard the *Skedeelia*. They need another cook." And Al's spirits plummeted even lower, achieving new depths, for that was Red Wildoe's ship.

Berger helped him pack. "Ya lucky creep," he kept saying with sneering envy. "From twenny-one rocks per month alla way up to sixty. Youse wouldn't even of been a lousy second-class seaman till March."

"You may call it luck," Al said somberly. "I call it madness."

BY THE TIME his gear was packed, his promotion had been cleared through the District Office and his travel orders cut and on their way to the station. Whether he liked the distinction or not, he was now a petty officer, a SC3/c. A man with a crow on his arm.

In the confusion and shock of his sudden graduation and departure he forgot his typewriter, which had been gathering dust under his bunk. He was halfway to Milwaukee before he missed the typewriter, and all he did was shrug. He could pick it up or send for it. In fact, he'd probably be back in a day or two—they wouldn't let him stay on the ship when his stupidity was revealed.

In Milwaukee he was met and trucked through gray wintry streets by a stolid, laconic Coast Guardsman. "What's it like on the *Skedeelia*?" Al asked.

"Oh, so-so," the man said phlegmatically.

The last part of the trip they seemed to be lost in a waste-

land of railroad tracks, soot-blackened warehouses, and tall mountains of coal. The ship, dirty, disreputable-looking old tender, was moored at a narrow splintery wharf by a long low building in a dirty, ice-choked creek.

There was no welcoming committee, no quartermaster around to log Al aboard, no side boys and bosun's pipe. For several indecisive minutes he hesitated on the dirty arena of the well deck, staring bleakly around.

Feeling a little spooky and very cold, he moved toward the near hatchway, the starboard entrance to the covered part of the main deck. Inside the door a passageway stretched down the side of the ship toward a door far aft, with closed doors at intervals along the inner bulkhead. Al peeked through the first door and saw a small empty mess compartment with its door shut. He tried the next passageway portal and abruptly felt less lost, for he was looking into the galley.

Moving fully into the open doorway, he saw Red Wildoe leaning on the meat block, sourly studying the *Navy Cookbook*. He made a familiar, homey picture, and Al was almost happy to see a known face. He dumped his heavy gear against the bulkhead and stepped inside.

"Hello, Red," he said diffidently, and Wildoe gave him a sour glance. "Whatta ya want?" he asked, stiff-lipped. Al said, "Uh . . . I'm the new . . . I've got orders transferring me aboard this ship. I'm . . ." He sighed. "A cook."

Recognition blazed in Wildoe's eyes. He pointed a finger at Al. "Chicago! Woolager's pot-walloper school!" Al nodded, grinned feebly. "I . . . uh . . . just got my crow."

With careful deliberation Wildoe poured the coffee out of his cup, watching it splash on the tiled deck, and then he hurled the empty cup against the bulkhead, his mouth gaping cavernously as if he wanted to scream and couldn't. Then Wildoe said softly, "I knew it. I knew they'd send one of them stupid bastards. I *knew* they would."

Knowing better than anyone else his shortcomings, Al winced and kept quiet.

A shaggy youth in dungarees and a filthy turtleneck sweater

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and knit cap stuck his head into the galley, stared with interest from the disconsolate Wildoe to Al. "You the new cook?" he asked, and Al shrugged and said he was supposed to be. "I *knew* they would" Wildoe whispered, and the guy in the doorway began to worry and twist a strand of long, lank hair that hung over his forehead. "Well," he said to Al, "I better show you where you bunk at, cookie. I'm the quartermaster on duty."

Without raising his head Wildoe said, "Not in *my* stateroom! Up forward or back aft, but not in my cabin, Salter."

Al gathered up his gear and trudged aft and below. I'm a fake and a fraud, he said to himself. I don't blame Red. Me, a cook? Don't make me laugh. Who *wouldn't* be sore?

"What's eatin' old Wildman Wildoe?" Salter asked.

"I'm not his type," Al said. He found himself in a gloomy, odorous metal cave, where five men sat around a table, with a single shaded bulb hanging low over it, playing cards. They were tough, baleful, ominous, sinister types who eyed Al thoughtfully and returned to their game. "It's the new cook," Salter said, and the gamblers turned as one man to give Al a careful second scrutiny. "We *need* a cook," one said, and another said, "Not like 'at muckin' Red, though."

Bunks lined three bulkheads of the square compartment, with lockers in the corners.

"Hey, you s'pose to sack in with Red in the after cabin," one of the men said. Al shook his head. No, he said. Down here, he said. They shrugged indifferently. Al spread his mattress on an empty top bunk, found an empty locker.

"Hey," a gambler growled, "someone ain't in."

Me, Al thought with deep sorrow. I'm the one. I ain't in. I never am in, I never will be in. I'm strictly an outside man.

THE FORTY-SEVEN-DAY period between the seventeenth day of February and the fifth day of April was significant in the life of Alvin Woods, ship's cook third class, because his superior, Ralph Wildoe, also SC3/c, did not speak to him in all that time. And the end of Red's stony silence on the night

of Saturday, April fifth, coincided, on account of another of those enigmatic twists of fate, with the crashing termination of a cold but steamy love affair Al ran through with an impulsive girl named Stella Pappharonis.

Several times during this interim phase, Al made up his mind to go to Chicago and get his typewriter, but each time something came up. And early in these forty-seven days, Al came to realize that for all his culinary education, Wildoe was at best a mediocre cook. A chary user of herbs and seasonings, a doggedly mechanical chef, Wildoe lacked that intangible quality of instinctive artistry which elevates a cook above the multitude of common cooks. On the other hand, it soon became evident that Al had that gift, that touch of mild genius.

It never occurred to either of them that in trying to make life miserable for Al, the head cook was throwing a boomerang. He was forcing Al to become a competent all-around cook and baker, he was strengthening the foe. A cleverer man would have given Al insultingly simple menus to prepare, thus stunting his growth as a cook and retarding his career. But Wildoe cherished the small daily triumphs and went on winning every battle while losing the war.

It was largely this domestic strife that drove Al into the clinging arms of Stella Pappharonis, for he would have been content to stay aboard ship on those bitter cold nights and read and listen to the radio, given light and quiet and a little peace of mind. It was one of the yeomen, Blanket-ass, as he was colloquially known, being part-Choctaw, who got him started in the habit of going ashore to be free of the racket and tension.

"You never go ashore," the yeoman noticed. "What's wrong, you broke or something? If so, I'll loan you some lettuce, Woods."

"I got money," Al said. "What's Milwaukee got to offer a boy?"

"Get dressed and I'll show you," Blanket-ass suggested.

Thus Al was introduced to the Oval Bar, on Wisconsin Avenue, and that same night met Stella. She immediately be-

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came two or three of the half-dozen reasons why his good intentions to run down to Chicago after his typewriter always ran aground between ship and railroad station. He couldn't stay away from Stella.

The first time Al saw Stella she was sitting at a table with a girl friend, and he was instantly fascinated by her dainty size, dark lustrous hair, flashing gypsy eyes, and the way her breasts pushed her sweater out tight and full. "Would you be interested in dancing with me?" he asked, and she said rather coyly that she *might*, so they danced and she was fragrant and dainty and soft and warm in his arms. He moved his glass of beer to her table and met her friend, whose name was Gailla, and that was how it started. He was ripe for romance that winter's end, and he always had responded powerfully to girls who were small, shapely, dark, and vivacious.

Even with Gailla in constant attendance, the budding romance was inexpensive to finance. The girls both drank plain cokes, being under the legal age for alcoholic drinks. But the first and second nights he was unable to separate the wheat from the chaff; he found himself buying Coca-Colas for seemingly inseparable childhood chums, and twice Stella refused to let him take her home. But the third time he asked, she said yes.

"I about decided you didn't like me much," Al said.

"Maybe I like you too much," she said. "You *do* something to me."

That's my goal in life, madam, Al said to himself humorously. That is precisely why I am here, Miss Pappharonis.

She refused to let him hire a cab, saying it was only a few blocks and she liked to walk. It was a brittle cold night with a thin wet wind that got down the back of Al's collar, chilling his spine. They walked six or seven blocks and then Stella stopped before an apartment house. "Here's where I live," she said. He put his arms around her, saying he was cold—he was cold, all right—and kissed her with a certain amount of clumsiness, being out of practice. She seemed to like it, though soon the cold crept into Al's bones and made goose-bumps on Stella's

satiny skin, and she said unhappily that she had to go upstairs now. Next time, he thought. I'll figure out some place to take her. He kissed her one last time. "Good night, baby," he said.

"Good night, big strong wonderful you," Stella said fatuously.

She went upstairs and he walked back to the Oval Bar feeling tense and feverish and disappointed, but elated too, a little delirious because if this was only the beginning, no telling where it would end. If it ever *did* end. I never knew anybody like Stella before, he thought. But then he added, except Jo Hill. Jo, he thought with nostalgia. To be honest about it, I'd still rather have Jo.

By the time he got to the bar and had a drink to thaw out his bones and steady his nerves, he was no longer quite so happy about Stella, somehow. Thinking about Josephine Hill had taken the edge off this deal in some inexplicable fashion. It hadn't revised his program in regard to Stella, it had only somehow eliminated the risk that he might ever foolishly think he was in *love* with Stella. This was strictly sex without sentiment.

After that he never entertained the notion of staying aboard ship at night, no matter what the weather. He tentatively mentioned the subject of hotels, and when she failed to register shock or indignation, he waxed eloquent. She was silent, but clearly in favor of the plan. Still, they got nothing settled definitely.

Not until the last Saturday in March did Stella Pappharonis agree to effect the illicit rendezvous, and even then she insisted on postponing the final surrender an entire week, an eternity. She had her reasons; she would need to prepare her parents for her all-night absence. Al would arrange for the room and they would meet as usual at eight o'clock in the Oval Bar on Saturday, April fifth.

The week of waiting was interminable, but April came, and then Saturday came, and Al hurried through supper and dressed and loped to the streetcar line.

He had made cautious inquiries, and Brownie, the water-

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tender, had recommended a discreet hotel. Al bought matching toothbrushes at a drugstore and then checked into the hotel with his ditty bag, registering as Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Smith. "My wife is arriving on a late train," he said, and the clerk winked solemnly and nodded. Al checked the room, and headed for the Oval Bar, almost running.

Stella wasn't there, but he was a little early, an eager beaver. At two minutes of nine Stella and Gailla came in and walked to the customary table.

"Hello, Gailla," Al said tersely, and to Stella, "Let's dance." He took her onto the crowded floor and crushed her hungrily in his arms and said huskily, "You're way late. Let's get going, honey."

She looked at him blankly. "Go where?" she asked innocently.

"It's Saturday," he said. "You know where. Everything's ready."

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Stella Pappharonis said archly, uttering a short laugh.

"I'm talking about a hotel room," he said fiercely. "Where you and me are supposed to go for the night, baby."

"Well, don't be ridiculous," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"Hey, *listen!*" Al snarled. "What cooks here? You trying to rat out on me? You're acting pretty gruesome, if you want my opinion."

She tossed her head. "That's right, go ahead and insult me."

"Who's insulting anybody?" he said tensely. "I just want to know what's the score here, that's all. What's the deal, baby?"

She sighed. "A girl can change her mind," she said weakly.

"Now listen," Al said grimly, "you're not pulling that stuff. You're not gonna bail out on me at the last minute like this, baby."

"*Well, after all!*" Stella said. "Just *what* do you think I *am*?"

Brownie, or Pelliteri, or Agnelli, or—in fact almost anybody you'd care to name—would probably have seen right off the bat that Stella was just a frightened girl who had got cold feet.

Even Al sensed this. But those other guys would have also remembered how easy it was to addle her with kisses. Al should have babied her a little, but he was a rookie lover who had suffered insomnia and drum-taut anticipation all week, and now Stella's natural feminine procrastination and need to be reconvinced seemed to him nothing in the world but deceit and treachery.

"I *know* what you are, all right!" he snarled. "A lousy little tease, that's what! A double-crossing little barfly! A cheap . . ."

Her eyes glazed with shock and she slapped him, and he finished the sentence and stalked off the dance floor, leaving her standing there blinking and wounded in the wreckage of their wintry romance.

Al drank a double-bourbon with a beer chaser and tamped it down with another double-shot, and sat staring balefully and lugubriously at the bottles back of the bar. Women! he thought bitterly, I am through with the whole tribe.

He was working on his fifth double-bourbon when Red Wildoe lurched out of a booth up front and came staggering pompously toward him. Red had been doing some drinking himself, and now he climbed unsteadily onto the stool next to Al.

"Wennever I givva goddam order I speckit to be essacuted, see?" Red Wildoe said thickly, and Al peered at him with eyes that wouldn't focus and said, "Aw, havva drink, you academy cook you." And he told the bartender to give his ole buddy and boss, who jus' happen to be the bes' baker inna Coast Guard, although *not* the bes' cook, a drink.

Looking a bit confused, Red tossed off his drink. "Now," he said, "about them cimmanon rolls. Wen I tella guy make cimmanon rolls . . ."

"Nobody," Al said, "can make cimmon rolls like you, Ralph. Bartenner, filler up."

They had another drink, and Al kept mourning the tragedy of the empty hotel room, and the evening grew very hazy and kaleidoscopic. Vaguely, he realized that he and Wildoe walked

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down a rocking crazy street, and Wildoe kept asking him who was in charge of the galley, and he kept saying, You're in charge, buddy. Foggily he was aware that they went to the hotel room and Wildoe had a bottle and Al kept shaking his head at the bed and saying sadly, "Nobody home at *this* bed, Ralph."

Wildoe remarked that it looked comfortable, and asked if Al minded if he tried it out. Cerny not, Al said. Go ride a head, mack. Red stretched out, sighed, and said one time he and a girl in Cheboygan . . . Al passed out lying on the dingy rug, trying to get the bottle open.

It was after nine the next morning when a taxi dumped them at the depot gate and they marched carefully and sleepily aboard ship, where the harassed steward had coped with breakfast. They relieved the steward of the duty, and without changing from his dress blues Al proceeded to turn out the worst meal of his entire career, while Red went back to sleep on the black gang's mess table.

Al was badly hungover. Whiskey, stay way from my door, he said to himself. I shouldn't have blown my top at Stella, he thought. Oh, he had it all figured out, now that it was too late. He should have wooed her some more, that's all. Well, it was all over now.

When he turned the watch over to Wildoe at noon, Red said gruffly, "Lissen, you move your gear, mack. That's a order, see. Move into the cooks' cabin."

PART III

Summer and Autumn, 1941

WITH HER well deck laden with bell buoys and channel markers, the *Skedeelia* left Milwaukee and steamed uplake through slush ice. Each day the cutter traced the trails and roadways of the lake, placing the channel markers, setting buoys to mark ledges and reefs and hidden dangers, hauling equipment and machinery to isolated stations and lighthouses. The skipper was O.K., he never rode the crew, he didn't go in much for discipline or inflexible routines.

In April the ship went to Chicago and moored just inside the locks at Old Chicago Lifeboat Station, and Al went ashore and rode a streetcar to his old address, wanting to get his typewriter and visit with Charley Berger. The C.O. did not remember Al. "What are you doing in dress uniform this time of day?" he growled, and when Al told him, the C.O. beamed fiercely and said he always liked to see one of the old boys again. In the galley they told Al that Berger had shipped out on the *Algomotoc* as a third-class cook and the ship was now in the Manitowoc shipyards being fitted out for duty as a convoy cutter in the Atlantic. Al had missed him there by only a day or two.

Al found his typewriter untouched in the attic, the case deep-coated with dust. On the way back to the ship he bought a new ribbon for the Smith-Corona. In the stateroom he uncased it and put it on the desk, handy if he should suddenly need it.

"What's that thing for?" Red asked stiffly.

"It's for us," Al said. "Is for you an' me, buddy."

"I'll sell my innerest in it for a stale beer," Red said gruffly.

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But several times after that Al caught him self-consciously typing letters to his mother in Menominee, with one rigid finger.

As for Al, he often felt like a motherless child. But in April he got a terse communiqué from Josephine Hill.

"What's this???" she wrote. "Coast Guard!!! I thought you were enlisting in the Marines. What happened???" And she wrote, "Spring is tippy-toeing onto the campus and I miss you when the sap begins to rise and the birds make nests and all that stuff. I have no new love, Alvin, I just play the field dating multitudes of Greeks. I am rooming with Beulah, who sends her love. She got a handwritten rejection slip from *Ladies' Home Journal* and is beside herself with joy. *Both* of her send their love. What *were* you two *doing* behind my back??? In fact, Alvin, what *are* you doing behind my back??? Write verbosely. Yours with high esteem and *fond memories*, Jo."

"Oh, No, Please, We Mustn't," Al said ruefully aloud, but it kind of excited him to hear from her, and he wrote her a witty letter on his typewriter—all about being a cook.

In April the *Skedeelia* returned to the Milwaukee depot twice for buoys and supplies, but Al did not go to the Oval Bar either time. He didn't want to see Stella.

The first time, Wildoe said, "I seen your ex-pig at the Oval last night. She was asking about you."

"Don't tell her *nothin'*," Al said, shrugging irritably.

The second time, Wildoe said, "I seen Stella last night. I walked her home. You got any objections, mack?"

"Nary a one," Al said. "Help yourself. She's not my type."

"I figure she kinda goes for me," Red said modestly.

It was still April, and the sun shone brilliantly on the blue water and Al felt more at home on the ship than he'd ever felt anywhere for a long, long time. He guessed it was being a petty officer who had a semiprivate stateroom and earned sixty dollars a month, mostly. Mostly that. But it was also a sense of belonging, of fitting in. And it was the guys, too, the nice friendly guys on the ship. In April Al decided he liked being in the Coast Guard after all.

In May, Alvin Woods reached voting age and celebrated his twenty-first birthday by getting drunk with his roommate.

In May the ship was always going to some new place to chart the depths and shallows and set the markers and haul machinery and supplies. Sailboats and speedboats and sleek yachts skimmed and skidded over the shimmering blue water. Fish were jumping and the cooking was plumb easy. You didn't fix a menu, Al would say. What should I fix for chow? And Wildoe would gaze at him blankly and say absently, negligently, Fix anything you want, just don't bore me with your stupid little problems. It was May and Wildoe was a smitten man. Somehow it astonished Al, he couldn't imagine stiff, wooden-faced, pompous Red in an emotional scene with Stella.

In June Al's scalp itched in the hot galley and he stopped wearing a white hat on duty, and one day an indignant CPO, whom Al rather disliked anyhow, came lumbering down from the chief's mess room. "Goddamit this has gotta stop!" he squalled. "This is the second time I find a hair in the goddam chow!"

"We don't charge no extra for hairs," Al said. "They're free."

"Oh, a smart guy! A comic, are you? We'll see about this, Woods!" And the tattle-tale went panting aft to lay his complaint before higher authority. An hour later the executive officer, who was also the engineering officer, came into the galley and eyed Al's bare head.

"Why aren't you wearing a hat on duty, Woods?" he wondered.

"It's too hot, sir," Al said. "Head gets sweaty and itchy."

"Woods," Kretlow said benignly, "if you insist on going bald, do so on your own time, don't molt in the goulash. Wear a hat."

"Yessir," Al said. Bald, he thought. Don't make me laugh, boy. But after that, sometimes, he worried about losing his hair. Harry O'Neal, the barber buddy in boot camp, had predicted it. And his own father's parting admonition had been to take care of his hair. But they couldn't *prove* that was his hair in the CPO's lunch.

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In June he went again to the Oval Bar in Milwaukee, and saw Wildoe and Stella huddled over a table, gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands. It was a disgusting spectacle, it saddened Al a little.

In July the skipper summoned his cooks to the wardroom and offered them opportunity—with strings to it. "I've got the word from the D.O. that all capable third-class rates, all you ultracompetent petty officers, may put in for promotion if they have held their present ratings for as much as four months. You guys have been rated longer than that, and I'm willing to perjure myself and endorse your competence. However, there may be a hidden reef here, gents. Becoming second-class might make you pretty susceptible to sudden transfers to salt-water duty, probably the Atlantic and possibly rugged convoy duty, or troop-transport duty. So it's up to you. Shall I kick you up the ladder or not?"

"I'd like to make second," Wildoe said woodenly.

"He wants to get married," Al grinned. "I don't, and I'm not anxious to get transferred, but I'd sure like to have the extra dough."

The skipper looked thoughtful. "Frankly, Woods, I imagine you're apt to get transferred without warning either way. The Coast Guard is growing so fast, and men with seniority will be sent wherever needed."

"Then I'd like to go for second-class, sir," Al said.

The skipper nodded. "I'll recommend you both."

July was really too languorous a time to knock yourself out seeking erotic diversions, so Al drank beer with his shipmates and fished and swam and read anything he could get his hands on—including a post card from his father.

"Dear Hotshot," his father wrote. "Why not drop your old man a line sometimes? I am as well as can be expected. How's it going with you? Hoping this finds you well, I remain. Your old man." And it was from the same town as the Christmas card had been, which was amazing. Staying so long in one place was a record of some kind.

Toward the end of the month Al became a ship's cook, *second*, and in a drugstore in Michigan in late July, Al bought a bottle of Lucky Tiger for his dandruff, or whatever. He didn't really need it, of course, but it made his hair smell nice. And if the tiger was lucky, maybe he would be lucky too. About *time* he was lucky, goddammit.

And suddenly July was gone, and the ship returned to Milwaukee in time for Labor Day; and suddenly old inscrutable, poker-faced, stiff-legged, portly, pompous Ralph "Red" Wildoe decided that the month of September was a good season to quit fooling around and get married. All over the world thousands of individuals, and even entire towns and villages, were living on borrowed time in September of 1941, but Red Wildoe, who seemed to have been born with a stiff upper lip, had been pierced fatally by Cupid's arrow and believed that he was so madly in love with Stella Pappharonis that marriage was the only solution.

Somehow, Al felt in a nagging, troubled way, Red was making a big mistake. "*Why* do you want to get married?" he asked Red.

The cold eyes regarded him. "I ain't gettin' no younger, mack," he said. "Any guy wants a home an' family?"

But still, Al had a feeling of prescience about the thing. "September is a helluva month to get married," he said. "Suppose there's a war? You might get shipped out and be away from home a *year*."

Wildoe eyed him bleakly. "So what?"

"Well, hell! That's putting a strain on *any* marriage, Red. What's *she* doing all that time?"

"Waitin'," Red said with bleak confidence.

Al gave it up, shrugging. "O.K.," he said. "It's your business."

But now Red was eying him thoughtfully. "How come this worries you so much, mack?" he demanded gruffly. "You know what I think, I think you're hurtin' with the green envies."

So Al dropped the subject and silently wished the fools a

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long, happy marriage and a long, deliriously wonderful honeymoon. But he didn't have any influence with fate, and the honeymoon lasted less than two weeks—because Wildoe got orders to replace the first-class cook on the *Algomotoc*, who had an attack of acute appendicitis less than a week before the remodeled cutter was to start the long voyage around through the lakes and down the St. Lawrence to the Atlantic.

Although Al didn't attend the wedding, which was a civil affair, he was able to give Red the best wedding gift of all. He volunteered to take over both cook watches for three days so the happy couple could go visit Red's parents in Menominee.

The days passed and there was a chill in the air that made the galley's warmth pleasant again, and autumn began coloring the shores and islands of Lake Michigan with pinks and golds and tawny browns, and Red came back from visiting his folks. To Al's critical eyes, the boss cook looked a little drawn and haggard.

Then orders came from the District Office assigning Water Tender Brown, Quartermaster Salter, Seamen Flanders and Gutsell, and Coxswain Pelliteri to the converted 165-foot *Algomotoc*. They were to report aboard in the shipyards at Manitowoc. Wildoe had fun ribbing them about it.

"In Boston there is twelve sailors and eight gyrenes for every dame. You better take some Milwaukee talent along," Red leered, "for there won't be none available out there, boys."

And then, stunningly, the D.O. *radioed* the ship two days later that the captain should send Ralph Elmer Wildoe, SC2/c, to Manitowoc immediately to replace the stricken first-class cook of the *Algomotoc*. They were getting another stricken cook, in case they didn't know it; Red went about his packing in bitterly stunned silence.

"This is a helluva note," Al said mournfully. "I wish they'd picked me instead of you, Red." He meant it sincerely.

"So do I," Red said. "But I guess they wanted a *cook*, mack."

He stayed in character to the bitter end, and then he left, walking in that peculiar short-legged, long-striding way of his.

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And watching him go, Al felt a great affection for the gruff, sarcastic, pompous, wooden-faced Wildoe.

And, Al learned at a later date, old Red followed his own advice about taking some Milwaukee talent along, as far as it was applicable in his case. Stella went with him to Manitowoc and stayed until the *Algomotoc* started her journey to the ocean.

THERE WAS a letter from Jo Hill the next day, one of those nutty, noncommittal, irritating letters she knew so well how to write. Jo said she was bored with college and didn't think she would ever finish. She was not attending OU now but had got herself a job in a news-clipping service in Oklahoma City. She explained that she read newspapers from all over the Southwest and cut out items about clients of the service—mostly notoriously wealthy types, she said. "Who knows, maybe I'll trap me a handsome millionaire," she said. But it didn't sound like much of a job to Al. And she signed the letter simply, "Yours, Josephine," instead of, "Love, Jo."

Pulling both cook watches made a stay-at-home of Al, but he went ashore in October to buy some razor blades and Lucky Tiger, and decided a couple of fast ones wouldn't hurt him. And so he went to the Oval Bar, out of loyalty to the management. If he'd had any vague notion of seeing Stella there, he would have gone elsewhere, *wouldn't* he?

Mrs. Stella Wildoe (nee Pappharonis) sat at her customary table with Miss Gailla Ginetto. He wasn't even going to nod or anything—why should he? But all at once she saw him and smiled hugely and waved and called, "Hello, Al—come here a minute."

He walked over, nodded at Gailla, and looked at Stella. She was smiling at him in what he suspected was a mocking manner, so he grinned and asked mildly, "How do you like being a sailor's wife, Stella?"

She flicked her eyes at him, pursed her cute mouth, and said

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ruefully, "Oh, it's all right . . . I guess." Then she explained why she had called him over. When she was in Manitowoc with Elmer, she said, an old friend of Al's had asked her to relay his greetings. (Elmer! Al thought, wincing.) She said it was the other cook on the *Algomotoc*, Chuck . . . what was his name? Chuck Berger. (Charley Berger, Al thought.) "So," Stella said with vivacity, "hello, Al, from Chuck Berger."

"Hello," Al said. "Well . . . can I buy you ladies a drink?"

The ladies thought that would be nice, and Gailla ordered her usual Coca-Cola, but Mrs. Wildoe, with a wicked smile, asked for Schenley's Seven-Crown and seltzer. Stella laughed at his astonished reaction and explained that her husband had taught her to like that particular drink, while they were on their honeymoon. Then she said, "Al, for old times' sake . . . one dance?"

So Al was dancing with Mrs. Red Wildoe, trying to keep it impersonal, when a couple of the guys from the ship who were dancing nearby spotted them and said, Hey, there's the gal that married ole Red. And they came over and impeded Al and Stella's progress, and one of them, a nice sort of kid named Gelborn, said, "Do we get to kiss the bride or not?"

Al felt annoyed. "How should I know?" he said. "Ask her."

"Well, my goodness, why not?" Stella said with that new wicked gleam in her eyes. "It's traditional, isn't it?" So Gelborn—who maybe wasn't such a nice kid as Al thought—yelled at some more *Skedeelia* crewmen at a table, and the first thing Al knew there were about a dozen sailors passing Mrs. Ralph Elmer Wildoe around, kissing her. She was flushed and laughing, and it made him sick. It made him angry, too. She was the wife of his old friend and ex-colleague who had just got shipped out to brinier waters, and here she was giddily passing out free samples.

When Stella broke it up, laughing, and came back to Al with her lipstick smeared all over her face, she looked rumpled and rakish and wanton. The music was going, and she moved into his arms unbidden, and they danced, Al stiffly and sullenly

but Stella, who just couldn't help it, dancing bonelessly, intimately close. And she said wickedly, "I don't recall seeing you in the stag line, Al. What was the trouble?"

"It started long ago," Al said, and saw by her wicked, mocking smile that she knew what the trouble was, all right. But she said mock-reproachfully, "I'll bet it was just to keep from kissing me."

"Not at all, my dear young lady," Al said. "Not at all. On the contrary, I feel pretty melancholy about missing my turn."

"We can't just ignore that oversight, can we, Al?" she smiled.

"No, I guess we can't," he said, and he started to kiss her lightly. Only Stella Wildoe wasn't having any of that, thank you; she refused to be kissed negligently, and presently he stopped dancing, feeling the blood pounding in his ears, and crushed her in his arms. Her warm lips clung in the old way and her body stirred subtly against him, arousing him, and finally he tore his mouth free and wished he'd had sense enough, or razor blades enough, to have stayed aboard ship.

With her nose in his collar, Stella said, "Whew! That kind of got out of control, didn't it? We'd better watch ourselves." And she threw back her head and gave him that bold, wicked smile again.

And he started fighting the big fight in his mind. Decency versus temptation; friendship versus desire; conscience versus passion; sensuality versus principles. It was going to be a tight fight with a short stick, he thought. Already he had that guilty feeling.

THE *Skedeelia* left temptation behind in Milwaukee and crossed the lake to Holland, Michigan, and tied up at a filthy coal dock. It was November now.

The *Skedeelia* worked around the north end of the lake without losing any more of her crew, and Al thought about Stella

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Wildoe with a yearning akin to love, and he thought about her husband with a feeling akin to guilt. I got to stay away from her, that's all, he told himself firmly.

The lake in November was a melancholy environment, and Al was always sensitive to environment. In November poor Al Woods was very unstable—angrily perplexed, firmly convinced, prudish, sophisticated, cynical, idealistic, uncommitted, rational, foolish, sensible, a very troubled young man. How can I ever stay away from Stella? he thought helplessly.

He should have had more faith in Providence. Down in Chicago the mysterious, inscrutable finger of fickle fate was prodding through personnel rosters, looking for a competent ship's cook who needed a change of scenery. They had a hot-new seagoing buoy tender ready for commissioning in Toledo, Ohio, and there was a vacancy in the commissary department. Fate was to rescue Al from the flames of illicit love.

The hot-new Coast Guard cutter was called *Legume*.

IT WAS Sunday morning in Toledo and there was nobody there to meet him. Everybody has gone to church, he thought wryly, and decided to take a cab to the shipyard.

The first glimpse of the ship thrilled and awed him. She looked enormous and rugged and warlike, her superstructure rising above the sprawling sheds of the yard; she was dark gray and mean-looking, long and broad and towering, with guns on her upper decks. Al felt like a raw boot again, a little scared and nervous and lost.

Al paid his fare at the gate and unloaded his gear and showed his orders to the guard. Under his cumbersome load of gear, carrying his typewriter in his left hand, he started up the new gray-painted gangplank, and a harsh voice snapped, "Halt, there, you!" Al bent his head and looked under his mattress roll that was wrapped around his sea bag, and saw a young,

red-faced officer standing at the head of the plank. "Where do you think you're going, fellow?" the officer snapped.

"This is the *Legume*, isn't it?" Al asked worriedly. "I'm assigned to the *Legume*, Ensign."

"That may be," the ensign admitted vinegarishly. "But there is a proper boarding procedure, or hadn't you heard? How long have you been in the Coast Guard?" Al said roughly a year, saying it meekly. "Then you should know how to come aboard a ship, fellow," the ensign said with thin scorn. "Haven't you ever been on a ship? What's your name and rate?"

"Alvin Woods, ship's cook, second class," Al said wearily.

"Well, you must have been on a pretty sloppy vessel," the ensign said condescendingly. "Otherwise you'd know enough to address an officer as 'sir,' and you'd know enough to request permission before coming aboard a ship. You request permission of the O.D. I am the O.D. You say, 'Permission to come aboard, sir?'"

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" Al droned with exasperation.

"Permission granted," said the ensign.

Al studied him warily. It couldn't be that simple. It wasn't.

"However," said the ensign sourly, "there is the small matter of saluting. You are required to salute the O.D.—or any other officer you happen to encounter. *Then* you request permission to come aboard. Let's run through it again, Woods. So you'll remember."

Shrugging grimly, Al gave a salute. He hadn't saluted anybody since his boot camp days. "Permission to come aboard, sir?"

"Permission granted," the ensign said bleakly, saluting back.

Al picked up his gear and went aboard the *Legume* and asked politely if the ensign could tell him how to get to the cooks' cabin. The ensign stared at him for a moment and then laughed.

"Well, now, Woods," the ensign said, like a man talking to an idiot, "I'm afraid somebody made a bad mistake when they

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drafted up the plans for this vessel. They omitted a most important detail, it would seem. They forgot to include cabins for the cooks."

If he is an example of the kind of officers they got on this ship, then I don't believe I care to stay here, Al said to himself. I believe I will resign from this vessel immediately. And he was thinking with nostalgia of Captain Orlando when somebody shouted, "Okie!"

Al looked around, startled, and saw a familiar swaggeringly graceful figure, a familiar face, a well-remembered cocky grin.

"The barber!" he said. "Harry O'Neal, from Cincinnati!"

"You ole whoremongerin' drunkard," O'Neal said delightedly.

"You ole Baronne Street whore hound," Al said, and saw the left-arm rating on O'Neal's undress blue jumper. "A pharmacist's mate!"

"Just call me Doctor O'Neal," Harry grinned. "Any time you need a short-arm, laxative, urinalysis, or blue ointment, ole Doc O'Neal is here to serve you, Okie. Where you *been*?"

"Lake Michigan, on a buoy tender."

The ensign cleared his throat noisily. "Since it appears you know Woods, perhaps you would help him get his bearings, O'Neal."

"Sure, I'll take care of him," O'Neal said. "C'mon, Okie." He picked up Al's typewriter and led the way through a watertight door into a passageway and into a spacious mess deck, where Al dumped his mattress roll and stopped to make an inspection. "C'mon, turn your orders in at the office," Doc said. "They'll call you when it's time to eat, Okie."

But Al was hanging over the lower half of a double door gazing raptly at a shining new galley. "Hey," he said to a dark-eyed boy in cook whites, "it's all electric, isn't it?" The cook nodded. "Wow!" Al said delightedly. "No more oil-blower ranges for me." And then, belatedly, "I'm Al Woods, ship's cook, second."

"Curly Matoli, *third* class." The dark boy grinned.

"How many cooks does she carry?" Al asked.

"Me an' you." Curly grinned. "Looks like you the head stud around this kitchen," he said. "Except," he amended, "for Chief Miller, commissary steward."

"How many guys we hafta feed?" Al inquired.

"Around a hundred all told," Curly said, and Al winced. He'd never fixed for any hundred guys before.

After Al got his bunk made up and his gear stowed away, O'Neal took him on a guided tour of the ship. The *Legume* was two hundred feet long and had a reinforced, cutaway bow for ice-breaking. Her high foc'sle dropped sheer to the huge well deck, or buoy deck, which was about twice as spacious as the *Skedeelia's* had been. Doc took Al up the steep ladder to the high flying bridge, and it made him dizzy to look down at the well deck. It also made him a bit dizzy to look at the two 20-millimeter antiaircraft guns mounted on either side of the flying bridge. And when they had descended and gone aft to the big gun tub with its sinister-looking 3-inch weapon, Al began to feel queasy. Was this a buoy tender or a battleship? There were even depth-charge racks on the stern, and a curious-looking device on the quarter-deck that Doc called a Y-gun.

That night Al lay staring at the canvas bunk above him, and wished he were somewhere else. The ship had too many crewmen, too many CPO's, and especially too many officers. They were bound to get underfoot. Only two cooks, he thought. Take a lot of pork chops to feed a hundred guys.

On December 2, after the commissioning ceremonies, all hands laid aft to the quarter-deck and the skipper addressed them. He was a thin, grim-faced, hard-bitten man crowding fifty, and he bit off his words like a man eating celery.

"Our home port will be Boston," he said. "That could mean we will do a considerable amount of convoy work. It is also possible that we might see some rough action before long. I do not anticipate an actual war with Germany, despite all the scare propaganda, but the fact remains that we cannot honestly be called a neutral nation. We are escorting convoys to England

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all the time, and that is an open invitation to the German U-boats. So it may be rugged out there, men, but we've got a rugged ship here—and I intend to have a rugged crew.”

There was more, a great deal more, but Al did not listen very attentively. He was studying the seven officers, trying to see behind their carefully blank faces, trying to guess what sort of men they were. The ensign who had given him a bad time when he came aboard was Higgins, but Al had not run afoul of any of the others yet. So he stared at the closed faces and registered only the more pertinent passages of the long and somewhat redundant lecture.

There were always problems and strains in adjusting to a new ship, the skipper said. It took a while to settle into new patterns and routines, learning to co-operate and perform duties competently, et cetera, et cetera. A taut ship, he said, was invariably a good ship, and a good ship was generally a happy ship, but happy or not he had every intention of knitting his crew and officers into an efficient and rugged, taut organization, ready for any exigencies that came.

While the skipper talked grimly of taut ships and exigencies, it was December 2. And the skipper, whose name was Thomas Fox and whose rank was lieutenant, senior grade, and who was not a regular Coast Guardsman but only a very competent ex-merchant mariner with a colorful past and a painful duodenal ulcer and a reserve officer status in the nation's oldest seagoing outfit, faced the difficult job of welding his human complement into a cohesive, adequate, functioning crew, of attempting to instill in them a feeling of pride and dedication to the service in general and the *Legume* in particular. And so he talked longer than was necessary or desirable, much longer than he would ever find it necessary to talk again. He was groping, searching, trying to find the magic words, and not sure, being a man of action and not a man of words, which were the magic ones. Therefore he used all the words he knew, it seemed, because it was only December 2 and his men, for the most part, wondered what they were doing in the Coast Guard in the first place, and

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why they were assigned to this ship in the second, and why it was necessary to have all this long-winded crud about taut ships and efficiency. The skipper seemed unable to explain himself.

In the end it was all made brutally clear to the men, and to the skipper himself, in six simple and hideous words.

THE JAPS HAVE BOMBED PEARL HARBOR!

PART IV

The Hooligan Navy, Summer, 1942

AL WOODS awoke with a fragment of his mind while the rest of his brain continued to wallow in the suffocating stupor that he knew, on alternate mornings, as sleep.

"Come on, Onionhead, hit the deck," Quartermaster Jenkins snarled.

Like thawing mud, a little more of Al's brain came awake and he realized he was bone-weary and stiff and sore—as if he'd only been asleep for a few minutes, when it had really been a good three hours. The worst thing about being a cook, aside from exceptional hazards like Lt. Higgins and deficient budgets, was the loused-up duty schedule. Yesterday it had been luxurious to sleep until noon, but it kept you from being able to sleep last night when you needed to.

Morning is mourning, Al said to himself. My eyes are raw, my tonsils are sore again, there will be the customary hotcakes without eggs or bacon for breakfast, and I am a sick man. I ought to swap my tonsils for a few happy days in bed at the hospital, he thought. What am I saving them babies for? He shivered and yawned hugely again.

"No wonder I wake up feelin' so lousy," he said. "Who is it turns off the ventilator, anyway? The air is so thick in here you could slice it with a dull knife." Jenkins said go ahead and slice up some for breakfast, it beats a steady diet of pancakes or French toast.

"My theory is Higgins does it," Jenkins added thoughtfully. "Turns off the vennilater, I mean."

"Don't say that word before breakfast," Al complained, and he brooded about Higgins a while. After today only Higgins

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and the C.O. would be left of the original seven officers; today Lieutenant Theron Bennett, the exec, was leaving the *Legume*. For some time there had been hopeful speculation among the men that maybe the skipper, whose ulcer made him difficult to love, would be transferred to a shore station near a drugstore well stocked with pills, in which happy event the logical choice to succeed him as skipper would be Bennett. But today Bennett was being transferred elsewhere, and by a horrible process of elimination which made him second in seniority to the C.O., Higgins of the catchup-red, sneering face would become exec officer.

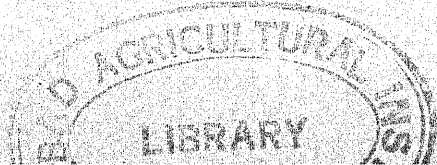
A lot of things had happened to Al in the seven months since he joined the ship in Toledo; for one, he'd developed a weary and cynical resignation which was covered succinctly by the phrase: That's the Coast Guard for you. Now he silently spoke the words in his mind as he got his towel and soap and toothbrush out of the locker. Before he remembered that it was not necessary, he also reached for his comb. Remembering, he sighed and closed the locker.

The first time he had seen his shaven head reflected in a glass it had shaken him badly. That had been the middle of May, when he had begun in earnest to worry about losing his hair. Haunted by the grisly specter of premature baldness, he had gone to the only available medical authority at the time, one Doc O'Neal who had been a barber and who was widely informed.

"You say ya goin' bald?" Doc asked like a pitchman. "You say ya losin' ya lovely locks, friend? Tell ya what I'm gonna do."

What he did was persuade Al that his only hope was to shave his head. Doc related half a dozen allegedly similar cases wherein miraculous cures had been accomplished with a razor, and offered Al this surefire panacea for incipient baldness. "I calls it the nude nogging method," he said. "Fightin' fire with fire, like. It's ya scalp that's sick, not ya hair."

Better I should be bald on purpose for a while than help-



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lessly bald permanently someday, Al rationalized. And twenty minutes later Doc rinsed his razor and studied Al for a moment and began to laugh up an attack of hysterics. "Look inna mirror, Frankenstein," he said, and when Al confronted his image he was shaken to the core, stunned and horrified. The ravished skull was slick and white and shiny and ghastly. But that was only the first time. Having gone so far, he allowed Doc to shave his skull twice more after that, the last time now only three weeks in the past.

Except for half a dozen self-conscious excursions to the nearest beer joint or movie house, Al hadn't left the ship since the middle of May, being painfully bashful about his odd appearance. And he had acquired the habit of wearing a white hat at all times except when he went to bed. It grew back so slowly, goddammit. And everybody had taken to calling him Onionhead.

Onionhead the poet, some called him, because during his voluntary incarceration aboard ship he had whiled away some of the endless hours entering limerick contests, with no success. Lately they had taken to calling him Onionhead the Malnutrition Expert.

With just cause, boy, he thought. But when he reflected upon the screwed-up finances of the general mess, he felt baffled. He couldn't figure out what the trouble was. They just kept going in the hole a little more each month no matter how he and Curly economized, and Higgins, who had unfortunately been commissary officer from the beginning, kept jumping on Chief Ed Miller, the commissary steward, and old Ed kept passing the word on to the cooks.

Sighing, he began to massage his scalp. Hit her a few licks three or four times a day, Doc had prescribed. So Al did. It was at that stage now where the sharp ridges and cornices were blurred and softened by the short fuzzy growth, but it was such a pale brown that he was not yet able to say definitely whether it was thicker or not. It never had been what you'd call thin, actually. He shrugged; wait and see.

The big concern was just to keep what he had until after he got married, he thought. After a guy got married it didn't matter if he did go bald. Heck, it was about halfway expected of him, even. Take old Red Wildoe, for instance. The last time Al saw him, Red's pink hair was noticeably thinner. And Stella, when he saw her that time with Red, was noticeably thinner too, kind of worn down. She had come to live in Boston, and she managed to let Al know that her husband was away on the *Algomotoc* much of the time, and had even slipped Al her phone number. Which Al had been afraid to keep, not trusting himself.

Sometimes, plumbing his innermost mind, Al admitted to himself that one reason he'd stayed so close to the ship for nearly two months was a fear of bumping into Stella and getting involved again. And maybe one reason he'd had his head shaved three times was because there was nothing so apt to cause a woman to resist his advances, if he *did* go ashore.

Anyway, Al's ideas had changed with old age. At twenty-two, it wasn't a series of casual conquests, or a dangerous affair with some married woman, he yearned for. He was ready to settle down. He was earning ninety-six plus sea pay, and he envied the guys who had wives waiting in Boston when the ship returned to home port. Except Wildoe, whose case was somehow the horrible exception. Al had a growing tendency to wish he were married; his life had a lonely present and a murky future, with no anchor, no family and home. Curly Matoli, now second class, was a married man, and Curly glowed with love and happiness when the *Legume* blew for Chelsea Creek Bridge, and moaned and groaned when the ship was away from Boston as much as a week.

A man, Al philosophized as he brushed his teeth, is incomplete without a woman, only half of whatever he's supposed to be. The right woman, she's the other half, the better half, like they say. Right now I'm only hitting on half my cylinders, but somewhere there's a girl, the girl, *my* girl. Someday I'll bump into her. I'm a fatalist, I know it's gonna happen. He even

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knew what she would look like, vaguely. Vaguely she would look an awful lot like an Oklahoma girl named Josephine Hill.

AL WAS in the mess deck cleaning the coffee urn when Lieutenant Bennett came up the starboard passageway from the wardroom, carrying his heavy load of luggage and looking gloomy. "Mornin', sir," Al said. "You're getting an early start, it looks like."

"Morning, Woods," Bennett gruffed. "Couldn't sleep. All set to shove off so I thought I'd do it before everybody got up. But I must admit I hoped you'd have some coffee made."

"You came to the right place," Al said eagerly. "I boiled some in the galley, it's just camp coffee but it's hot."

Bennett sighed with relief and lit a cigarette. "Woods, you saved my life," he said in his deep voice. "Join me, won't you?"

Al got two mugs from the scullery and filled them with the hot black coffee and sat across from the lieutenant at a table. "Sir," he said, "all us peasants sure hate to see you go."

Bennett raised his thick black eyebrows. "You mean you hate to see Higgins become exec, isn't that more accurate, Woods?"

Al grinned. "Both. If somebody hasta go, why not him?"

"I wish it was Dennis Higgins getting this command I'm stuck with," the big lieutenant said wryly. "I never was anxious for command, and now I've drawn the prize pickle, the hard-luck ship of the fleet. She's in dry dock for repairs at the moment, and guess what happened—she dropped a depth charge and blew off part of her own stern."

"What kind of ship is it, sir?" Al wondered. "A cutter?"

"Let's not dignify her with the title ship," Bennett said. "They call her *Snafu*, but she was commissioned as the *Algomotoc*."

"Why, heck, sir," Al exclaimed, "I got buddies on that tub. I know both the cooks, Wildoe an' Berger. And a yeoman, Blanket-ass Christy. Lessee . . . Pelliteri, a bosun's mate by now, probably. And Brown, and Horse Flanders, and Salter, a snagtooth quartermaster. Brownie, he's a water tender."

"Water tender," Bennett sighed. "An obsolete rate in this age of Diesels, but naturally my first command would be an old steam-turbine baby. It's a great honor to be chosen to command a ship, I suppose, but I can't help wishing you'd put some arsenic in this coffee."

Al couldn't tell half the time whether Bennett was kidding or not. He had a deadpan sense of humor.

"Well, considerin' the screwed-up condition of the general mess, and the fact Higgins is gonna be exec," Al said, "I kinda wish I was going to the old *Motock* with you, sir."

"Come now, lad, things aren't quite that desperate here yet," Bennett chided. And added, "You haven't figured out the root of your mess problems yet, I take it?" He said it rather ambiguously, and Al looked at him quizzically and said no, it baffled hell out of him, and got up the nerve to say, "Do you know, Lieutenant?"

Bennett looked at his coffee, frowning. "Let's just say I've wondered about certain matters, Woods. Off the record, I suspect the general mess difficulties originate *outside* the general mess, if that's not too elaborately devious." He stood up. "So long, Woods. If it helps any, I might remark I have nothing edible in my luggage. A certain fraternity obligation, despite a hearty distaste for some of my brethren, prevents me from speaking more lucidly. Well . . . wish me luck, and I'll reciprocate."

"I do wish you luck," Al said earnestly. "All the luck in the world, Lieutenant." And Bennett shook hands, grinning stiffly, and went off to take command of the hapless ex-Lake Michigan cutter.

There goes one of the good guys, Al thought. One of the few good guys, Al added silently.

After nearly twenty-one months in the Coast Guard, he was pretty sick of it. The war which had started with such terrible sickening suddenness, with such a shivery promise of violent adventure, had become dull and stale and seemingly endless to Alvin Woods. The *Legume* was like a man whose job it was to lime the yard stripes on a football field, but who stayed

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home on Saturdays and missed the excitement. The ship's job was to service and maintain aids to navigation so that other ships could get safely out into deep water where there was no safety; her job was to mark off the shipping routes for the merchant vessels that were hunted mercilessly by Axis U-boats.

The trouble was, nothing ever *happened* for the *Legume*, at least insofar as the headlined WAR was concerned. The periscopes of U-boats that brought her men racing topside to battle stations, inevitably turned out to be only sticks floating in the ocean. And two-thirds of the alarms turned out to be the skipper's idea of keeping his crew alert and well trained—or maybe it soothed his ego to push a button and watch ninety-odd men explode into a scrambling, wild-eyed frenzy.

"False alarm," the men would say. "Old man's ulcer actin' up."

That was the *Legume's* war, to date—nervously spontaneous false alarms and calculated false alarms. The war was always over the horizon, the war was something you read about in the Boston papers, or heard about on the radio, but never expected to get within sight or sound of otherwise, because you were in the Coast Guard.

Oh, there were exceptions—the escort cutters that made the deadly convoy runs in the North Atlantic, going as far as Murmansk, and the transports and landing vessels that put soldiers and marines ashore on enemy soil—but Al was talking about this coast-bound branch of the Coast Guard, that branch of the family represented by the *Legume*. *That* Coast Guard was neutral.

Finally and inevitably the hard core of Al's discontent had to do with the fact that the general mess was operating in the red, and he didn't know what to do about it, or understand why it was. And in July after Lieutenant Theron Bennett departed to become skipper of the *Algomotoc*, Al slew legions of stubbornly, crawlingly tedious minutes trying to decipher the meaning in Bennett's baffling farewell remarks. Surely he hadn't meant the officers were somehow sacking the general mess.

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"Thanks," Al snarled. "You make me feel a lot better, Chief."

THERE WERE no U-boats in Buzzard's Bay, or buzzards either, as far as Al could see. "A buzzard would starve hisself to death follerin' this here poor hungerin' vessel," one of the dieting seamen said. "Unlest we might thurrow it one of them dadburn cooks." There was griping in Woods Hole, in Falmouth. And Al flinched when he heard it. Being a man who had a high regard for food himself, it hurt him to stint on the chow. He felt guilty about it. The situation preyed on his mind. He made a point of eating exactly what the men ate, although one of the traditional rewards of being a cook was free access to the larder, and he felt like griping himself.

They started home from Buzzard's Bay on Friday the seventeenth. Al liked to be up on the flying bridge when the *Legume* came back to home port, especially in bright sunny weather like this. He'd found a Rand-McNally Boston guide at the Buddies Club and tried to memorize the harbor's historically significant islands listed on page twelve, and he liked to try to identify them as the ship progressed up the harbor. Some of them, according to the booklet, were cool and green, others bristling with guns. He liked the idea of anything bristling with guns. While he was up on deck he took the cover off the starboard 20-millimeter Oerlikon antiaircraft gun and examined it with a proprietary, almost paternal, feeling. It was his battle station, his weapon, his little popgun; he patted the rough, hot, gray-painted metal with affection. Hello, you worthless hunk of scrap iron, he thought. The gun had one minor flaw—it wouldn't depress far enough to be of any use in the only kind of battle the buoy tender might conceivably engage in, a fight with a U-boat. There were no enemy aircraft in the American Theater of War, and *Legume's* two high-mounted twenties wouldn't depress below the horizon. Which accounted for some of Al's wry affection for the gun; it was somehow symbolic of

himself, he figured, and of the Coast Guard as he knew it, and of life in general. Baby, we're both misfits in a misfit outfit, he told the gun silently.

AL WAS on deck smoking a cigarette after chow when the new commissary officer, Scraggs, came aboard. He was standing at the break of the port boat deck watching Chief Bosun's Mate Huxley and some of the deck gang carrying empty propane cylinders across the gangplank and into the buoy jungle of the depot yards, when movement up toward the depot gates attracted his aimless attention. What he saw was an officer and three enlisted men marching in step toward the ship.

The humor of it struck Al. Here was a hot July day, and here was a thin, gawky ensign wearing a brand-new uniform, and here were three enlisted men with sea bag-mattress rolls on their left shoulders and ditty bags in their right hands, marching single file under the nervous paternal scrutiny of the ensign. "Hup toop hup toop," the ensign was calling the cadence. He was tall and thin and graceless, all arms and legs and long neck and pink gleaming youth and self-consciousness. He brought his motley squad smartly to the gangplank with a rye flank hut hoo *halt!*

The ensign saluted Chief Huxley jerkily, blushed furiously, and said, "I, ah, thought you were an officer. Are you the O.D.?" Huxley stared at him curiously and shook his head, and the ensign said with uncertainty that he was to report aboard the ship, as were the three enlisted men, and Huxley spat over the rail, glanced up at Al on the boat deck and winked, and said, "Mister Woods, would you be so kind as to kick on the skipper's door and inform him there are people down here who want to ask permission to come aboard this vessel?"

Al grinned and walked fifteen feet to the skipper's stateroom

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and knocked, and the skipper yelled come in. He was a tall, gaunt, granite-faced man somewhere around fifty, with thinning black hair and icy eyes. Al told him that an ensign and three enlisted men were at the gangway wanting permission to come aboard ship and report for duty.

"Tell them I said if they have orders for this ship they may come aboard and present themselves at the ship's office," the skipper said harshly. Then he added, "Hell's bells, I'll do it myself." And he went stalking out to the boat deck. "I am Lieutenant Fox, commanding this vessel," he snapped. "I have been a sailor for thirty-two years and I have the reputation of being a tough captain. You'll have no holiday on this ship. Huxley, detail a guide to escort these men to the ship's office and have the master-at-arms show them where they will sleep." He turned on his heel and, as he passed Al, said wearily, "Where do they find such splendid specimens, Woods?"

Al grinned politely and wandered below to the galley.

At one-thirty there was mail call, and Al was astonished to hear his name mentioned. For a moment he had the dizzy hope it might be a letter from Josephine Hill, but it turned out to be a package from his father, containing a genuine Kaywoodie pipe and a peck of homemade cookies, with no other explanation than a scrawled note saying: "You had another birthday unless I miss my guess, Hotshot." It was signed: Your Old Man. And the gift brought a sudden lump to Al's throat; he made a mental vow to write his father a long, informative letter. But what really baffled him, aside from the unexplained cookies, was the fact that the itinerant, unstable barber who had sired him was still in the same town he'd been in a year ago last Christmas.

He was sampling the cookies with coffee when the skipper appeared in the open top half of the portside door. "Hubert around?" he demanded. Al said he hadn't seen Dave Hubert, the officers' steward, recently. The C.O. fidgeted for a while, glancing back toward the wardroom pantry, and finally said, "Do we still have some canned hams left down there, Woods?"

"Yessir, I think so," Al said.

"I wonder if you'd get me one?"

I wonder what you'd say if I said no, Al thought, reaching for the key to the stores locker door.

There were only two of the expensive canned hams left, and he deduced that the wardroom had been hitting them pretty heavy—they favored the luxury items, being gentlemen and all that. As he watched the skipper fit the rectangular can into his ditty bag and zip it shut, Al wondered idly if all the officers carried supplies to their girl friends when they went ashore. They all carried ditty bags like the skipper's, at any rate. And all civilian women were on rations now. Ordinarily, fetching up the dainties for the officers to cart up the street was Dave Hubert's job.

Some time later, while sharing his cookies with Yeoman Sam Goff, he mentioned the canned ham.

"I think you miss the full impact of this, Onions," Goff said. "Who antes up the nine dollars? That ham came out of the general mess stores and should now be marked up against the wardroom mess, or the skipper personally. Otherwise us peasants are stuck for it." He lifted eloquent eyebrows. "Wouldn't take many nine-dollar hams to add up to a mess deficit, if you see what I am drivin' at, boy."

"All you're doin' is confusing me, Sam," Al told him. "I'm just a backward cook, I don't know how the system works. Explain me."

"The officers' steward and mess attendants—in this case, Dave an' tired, slow-movin' Moses Scales—are suppose to keep an accurate record of all the chow they take back aft," Yeoman Sam stated. "That's a weak system right there. Dave's overworked and could easy forget to jot it down every time, an' Mose is too lazy to bother. Then the mess treasurer is supposed to keep an accurate log from Dave's list of groceries hauled aft. Then every month the mess treasurer is supposed to get together with ole Ed Miller and figure out how much the wardroom owes the general mess. Too much margin for error all along the way.

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If I was head cook an' people were plottin' against me, I'd sure start keepin' my own set of books, Alvin boy." He poured his cold coffee in the galley sink. "If you want the accurate mathematical statistics for the past few months, I'll send you Storekeeper Osborn, who keeps book on the commissary department. Ask him how much the officers been payin'."

"Send him around," Al said grimly. "Suddenly I'm curious."

The supper menu called for potato pancakes, and Al was running raw potatoes through the meat grinder when Storekeeper Osborn appeared in the galley door. "Goff said you wanted to see me, Woods," he said politely. He was a plump, stolid, humorless man who had a wife and four children living in two rooms in Malden, and who yearned constantly for duty on the West Coast where his parents and in-laws lived. For some time now Al had been in the habit of slipping Osborn a little butter to take to his kids whenever the ship came back to Boston. There was something pathetic and gallant about Osborn keeping his cumbersome family with him, and Al paid tribute to his stolid heroism with hard-to-get butter.

"I just want to know how much the wardroom has been payin' for chow lately," Al said. "Say, for the last three or four months."

Osborn removed his glasses and polished them, gnawing his lip. "I couldn't say, offhand, Woods. It varies. Higgins says they buy a lot of their food ashore."

"The hell they do!" Al snarled. "Is he the treasurer now?"

"Well, he's *been* the mess treasurer for several months," Osborn said nervously. "Nobody else wants the job, I guess." He put his glasses on again.

"I still want to know how much the gold braid pays for chow, Osborn."

Osborn sighed. "I don't know if I should tell you, Woods—without proper authorization, I mean. If I get Higgins sore at me I'll *never* get a transfer to California."

Al got half a pound of butter out of the reefer and wrapped

it in the newspaper and gave it to Osborn. "For the kids," he said, and stood there eyeing the storekeeper and waiting, and Osborn looked furtively up and down the passageway and leaned in the door and said rapidly, "April, May, and June. April, eleven-fifty per officer. May, ten dollars and eighty cents. June, ten dollars and fifty cents."

Al stood rooted in his tracks long after Osborn had gone. I don't believe it, he thought, stunned. Ten dollars and fifty cents last month—barely enough to pay for one canned ham. Thirty cents a day—maybe thirty-five cents a day—and I couldn't feed an enlisted man half as well on eighty-six cents a day while going in the hole again in June. Officers and gentlemen, wartime leaders, patriots, and as miserable a bunch of petty thieves as the world has ever known, boys.

Well, he thought with sudden grief, now I know, don't I? Isn't anybody in this lousy world fit to be trusted?

HAVING got off to a depressing start, July never recovered. All over the world and in the wardroom the enemies of Democracy seemed to be getting all the best of the war. Lieutenant Higgins was ominously quiet, and the scuttlebutt was that the new exec kept busy back in his cabin drawing up blueprints for a stern new daily routine for the crew. And there was dissension in the galley, when Al told his colleague to forget all that old crap about economizing.

"Our legal and moral duty is to feed the guys well," Al said. "Under the circumstances it's even more so, Curly. It ain't us and it never was. We could go along a while trying to plug the hole, but they'd just keep unpluggin' it. We can't win, so we're just gonna ignore the mess deficit and feed right, see. I got some pride and self-respect left."

"So have I," Curly bristled, "but that don't mean I want a transfer to Greenland or some place."

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"You married guys signed the same contracts us bachelors signed," Al said sarcastically. "I happen to be the senior cook here, an' you take your cookin' orders from me."

So Al restored the general mess to full rations, and began keeping a record of the food items carried ashore as reported to him by Dave Hubert.

In July, Al waited impatiently for his hair to grow, and read anything he could find to read, and played checkers with Doc or Sam, and quite often thought of Josephine Hill with wrenching nostalgia. And a couple of nights after he got the Kaywoodie pipe and cookies in the mail, Al wrote a letter to his father. It was the only real letter he ever wrote his father, and it was the last.

One of the new seamen who had come aboard with Ensign Scraggs, watched Al type with arrogant interest. His name was Franklyn P. Scott, III, and—according to Yeoman Sam, who read everybody's service record sooner or later—he was a Harvard man.

"Can you do formal business letters?" he asked Al.

Al shrugged. "I guess I could if I took a notion, Harvard."

"I'll pay you to do some for me," Harvard said eagerly.

"I might do it," Al said, yawning. "For a dollar a page."

"Very well," Harvard said. And that same evening Al earned ten dollars typing business letters, and got to know a good deal more about Franklyn Peabody Scott, III. The Harvard law student had been busted out of cadet school at the last minute because he was "not officer material." Which meant, he confessed, that he had argued endlessly with the instructors. The letters were inevitably to public figures, politicians, military big-wigs, high governmental figures, and other men of influence, most of them names Al had seen somewhere or other in print, and all of whom apparently had one remarkable distinction in common: They had all been close friends at Harvard or elsewhere with F. P. Scott the Second. All Harvard wanted of them was help and influence in getting the officer's commission he felt his education and social position rated. "Dear General

Schlemp," he would declaim unctuously, "my father often speaks of you with great admiration and affection . . ."

Four or five nights a week Al would uncase his typewriter and bang out eight or twelve persuasive applications for assistance. He liked the idea of being paid to stay aboard ship for a change. He was unaware of the hidden peril in acquiring an easy, coherent facility for writing letters to important personages he didn't know; he did not realize until too late that he was being indoctrinated with the insidious philosophy that if you didn't like the way things were you could write to people who might change the course of human events.

He was aware that five nights a week an angry radio commentator named Winfrey Fugate went on the air in New York to issue blanket indictments against all the tyrannical, corrupt, brutal, despotic, unpatriotic, sadistical military leaders and lousy rats who made life miserable for enlisted men like Al. Two or three nights a week the program was tuned in on the radio in the wardroom and piped into the mess deck through the amplifying squawk box, and Al listened with one ear while earning his pay as a part-time private stenographer.

The griping of the crew had abated; although the truth about the general mess trouble was now common knowledge, the men of the *Legume* were curiously inert about it, apathetic regarding the brigands in the back room. But this inertia was largely attributable to Al's restoring the crew to full rations.

Sometimes Al felt pretty sensitive about being in the Coast Guard. He had duty on a noncombatant, virtually neutral vessel whose officers were preoccupied with gluttony and who believed rank was a splendid protection against being caught pilfering. It often seemed to Al that the entire Coast Guard was a little embarrassed about being Coast Guardsmen—except maybe the cocky bearded men off the convoy cutters, who needed to apologize to no man because of any lack of battle stars. But in general, Army and Navy guys looked down on Hooligans. How's the war goin' at the USO, Hoolie? they might ask. How'sa ole bathtub navy these days?

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July ended, and no matter how you analyzed it, July had not been a good month, although it *had* been highly profitable to Al Woods financially, and not without encouragement in the hair department.

August started with a thud. The thud was Higgins closing the thick book of Navy Regulations. The grand new program for improving morale, efficiency, discipline—and in fact everything else except the food situation—was ready. Tacitly abetted by the skipper, whose custom it had always been to leave personnel matters to the discretion of his executive, Higgins caused the master-at-arms to blow his bosun's pipe and tell all hands to lay aft to the quarter-deck at thirteen hundred hours. Exchanging looks of alarm and foreboding, all hands laid aft. The skipper did not attend the forum, since he was in his stateroom drinking milk and eating pills for his ulcer.

Now hear this! Higgins bawled.

Quote: Henceforth there would be calisthenics every day at thirteen hundred hours except Sundays and during heavy weather, to be immediately followed by semaphore drill. Henceforth the use of obscenity would be forbidden; there would be a tapering-off period of one week, after which the guilty would be placed on report and severe punishment would befall the more flagrant offenders. Henceforth the lights in the crew's mess deck would be doused at twenty-two hundred and thirty hours except Saturdays when in port. Henceforth the cook with the duty would secure the galley as soon as possible after evening chow and turn in the keys to the O.D. at evening muster. Henceforth the rules of etiquette applying to the custom of saluting superior officers and of standing at attention whenever a superior officer entered a compartment would be observed. Henceforth all men would maintain a tidy appearance when off duty, keep their gear, bunks, and uniforms neat, and shave each and every day.

And henceforth, Higgins added as if he'd almost forgotten, all hands would receive one hour of artificial resuscitation drill each week, and these new orders of the day would become

effective as of this moment, and Ensign Scraggs would now take over for calisthenics.

Ensign Scraggs took over smiling fiercely. Let us begin with a few deep knee-bends to loosen up, men, he said. Ready? Hunh, toop, hup, doo, huh, hoo, hut two. Scraggs had found his niche in the service.

Sweating in the hot sunshine, Al gave himself up to disgust. The mess deck was half-cleaned and here were the mess cooks toning up their ligaments. Semaphore drill your aspirin! Why should a first-class cook learn to send a message by waving his hands and arms around like a moron? And evening reports, for chrissakes! What did a cook have to report—that in spite of the earnest efforts of the wardroom mob there was still a little food left in the stores locker? And what was the big idea turning out the mess deck lights at ten-thirty every night? Where would an off-duty cook go to do his necessary reading until one or two in the morning? Listen, Higgins, Al thought heatedly as he touched his knees without bending his toes, I'll lock up that galley when I get good and ready. Who do you think you are?

But Higgins had gone below. The calisthenics wasn't for officers, of course. They were all fine physical specimens to begin with, and stayed in shape by carrying heavy loads of enlisteds' chow ashore and by pulling themselves up to the table.

In August rebellion smoldered in the breast of Al Woods.

He did not know that in May the wolf packs and loner U-boats had made one hundred and two acknowledged kills, mostly along the east coast of America. He was unaware that in June the toll was one hundred and eleven Allied ships, a new world's record kill, or that in July, that calamitous season of Higgins's rise to power, the bag dropped to a scant fifty-one sinkings, largely because the Allies had developed effective countermeasures against the U-boat packs that harassed the Atlantic convoy lanes. The Allies had pretty well destroyed the effectiveness of the wolf-pack type of submarine warfare, but in so doing they had caused the U-boats to scatter and begin

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to concentrate on easier victims—the lone ship seen through a scouting periscope, the careless, the unwary, the slow, and the helpless. Some ships had enjoyed the immunity of comparative unimportance, heretofore, but now the subs were becoming less particular. A target was a target.

And a poorly armed Coast Guard vessel was a target.

Perhaps one reason the skipper's ulcer bothered him so much lately was because he knew a lot of dark things that a ship's cook would never know until he read the pages of history after the war was over.

August was a good growing season for kernels of insurrection, helped by the rich fertilizing voice of a slightly jingoish patriot named Winfrey Fugate, who unctuously despised all who abused the privileges of rank. And really, in August, all a cook needed in order to flare into crackling rebellion was a slight nudge or two.

And he got them in August. No decent place to read after ten-thirty was a nudge. And having to relinquish the galley keys at night was a rude elbow in a cook's touchy pride—it almost implied that Higgins was insinuating that the cooks were the real culprits.

And Ensign Skinny Scraggs's enthusiastic shopping at the Navy Commissary was more than a nudge, it was a kick in the belly. He came back beaming brilliant self-assurance, followed by a truckload of marked-down specials and remainders.

Scraggs gave Al the manifest and asked if he would check the chow aboard, to be sure the trucker hadn't mistakenly left anything at the warehouse. Al checked the manifest, and soon realized that the trucker's mistake was not in leaving practically all of it at the warehouse. Skinny was a lousy purchasing agent. There was an item listed as "Overseas Hams." Not Swift, not Armour, but Overseas. "Ensign," Al said disgustedly, "these things aren't fit to eat. They were invented for emergency use in tropical climates, they're so salty they'd keep forever. They can't spoil because they are already unfit to eat."

The ensign looked a little hurt and bewildered. He had been

so proud of the shrewd business deal he had consummated with the Navy. He had bought six crates of the wonderfully inexpensive hams. He had also bought a lifetime supply of Overseas bacon.

There were other bargains. Six boxes of hamburger, as the Navy optimistically labeled the stuff. Four boxes of "stewing and boiling" beef, which defied description, and could scarcely be graded.

"Well, you have bought those items before, Woods," the rookie economist pointed out defensively.

"We *had* to take a box of hamburger an' a box of stewin' meat with every box of 'roastin' an' fryin' ' meat, or else," Al explained grimly. "Did you get any of the roastin' an' fryin' beef, Ensign?"

"Why, yes, I purchased two boxes of that," Skinny said warily.

Al sighed. Well, send a kid to do a man's job, whatta you expect? Here he'd figured his main grievances had to do with stuff the higher castes were carting *ashore*. Now he had to start logging it both ways, the stuff Skinny was bringing *aboard* was the worst crime yet.

"Hold the deal!" Al said. He had come to a line that read: Beef loins, 1, U.S. Choice. "How come you only got one slab of T-bones?"

"Oh, that . . . it's for the party," Ensign Scraggs said brightly. What party? Al demanded. "The uh party for uh the commanding officer," Skinny blinked nervously. "His birthday is Saturday the fifteenth, you know. Next Saturday night."

"Oh, that'll be nice," Al murmured, silently adding his favorite four-letter obscenity. "A T-bone an' sirloin party," he said bitterly.

THERE WAS nothing in the newspapers or on the radio about Saturday, August 15, being the anniversary of

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Thomas Fox, but the fabulous occasion was duly celebrated by ninety American enlisteds first, with an early evening chow consisting chiefly of scalloped potatoes au gratin. Ordinarily the presence of baked ham would have been newsworthy. Meat not hidden in a casserole, drowned in a stew, or ground into a dubious and diluted meat loaf, was rare for the crew these days. But this was Overseas ham, redolent of brine. Al had soaked five hams for three days in the stock pot, changing water half a dozen times a day in an effort to draw some of the puckery harshness out of the meat, and had parboiled them twice before boning, then boiled them a while in a further fruitless attempt to extract some of the entombed salt, finally baking the gritty petrified pork with pineapple and brown sugar. But still the peasants were ungrateful.

"Our guests have guests coming," Al informed the cook's helper, Country Boy Bagley, a farm boy from Missouri. "They will eat dirty ole T-bones and sirloins come sundown."

With the anguished reproach of his fellow men ringing in his ears, Al commenced the job of fixing goodies for the thieves' carnival. I will give them the best chow I know how to fix, Al said to himself, because I have a stern code of culinary ethics. Besides, I understand from usually unreliable sources—from the officers, I mean by that crack—that women will be present at this function, as they have inevitably been at all wardroom social functions, and I happen to have deep respect for women, although I mistrust them each and every one of them.

Presently Dave came up to leave the stack of huge silver platters with U.S.C.G. *Legume* engraved on them. "Man," Dave said, "you oughta get a gander at all the whisky back there."

"Whisky an' sirloins, ten-fifty a month," Al said. "That's the way to live, Dave. We all ought to go in for that kind of livin'."

A few minutes later Doc O'Neal came into the galley and wiggled his hips. "Dearie, I just hadda come tell you how much I enjoyed that divine ham we had for supper," he said. But

although he grinned a little, Al was having solemn thoughts, and he said, "Doc, that guy on the radio, ole Winfrey Fugate, he says if a guy knows about some dirty ole officers abusin' the privileges of rank . . . Look at all this high-class chow. We're buyin' them people a high standard of livin'."

"I'll have mine medium rare," Doc said. "Listen, have you seen them debutanties yet? Did you squint at all that talent that just come aboard?" He sighed. "The gold braid located a whole covey of wimmin."

"I didn't see 'em, I ain't interested," Al said sourly.

After a while Dave brought Al a drink, compliments of the C.O., and Al accepted the highball but rejected the compliments. The old man was just showing off, he thought. Impressing the company with a democratic gesture. "How many girls back there, Dave?" Al asked.

"Eight ladies, two Army joes," Dave said. "I guess this is a big thrill to those ladies, havin' dinner on a battleship, man."

"It's a big thrill to the general mess to pay for it, too," Al said sarcastically. "We're all happy to defray the costs."

Dave snapped his fingers. "Glad you reminded me, old chap. While I was servin' a round of drinks one of those Army gals said wow, man, this little shindig must be settin' the wardroom mess back plenty. And ole Higgins kinda prooned his feathers an' says, why nossir, as a matter of fact this here little snack was no strain a-tall, as they had managed to build up a tidy little surplus in the mess kitty." Seeing Al's amazement, he chuckled. "That's what the man said, Alvin. He said why General suh, it don't cost us a red penny out of our own pockets *beeecause* they had done gone and bought all that goofus juice an' little *deeleckacies* with a *surplus* they had *akoomulated* in the righteous wardroom mess kitty. That's what the man said."

"God *dayum!*" Al said hoarsely.

"Yes lord, but there's more," Dave said. "The Army gal looked astounded an' says how in the livin' world did you manage to do a splendid thing like that, sir? You must have

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one helluva sharp mess treasurer. An' ole Higgins preened hisself some more an' says, I am the cat that hannels the kitty, an' the how come of it is I am a little too hep to human nature to let the commissary cheat us. You got to watch them like a hawk or the general mess would have us officers payin' for *twice* what we actually *get*."

Something broke inside Al, something sprouted and grew. He sighed. "Well, that does it," he said quietly. "That tears it, Dave. I'm gonna write a letter." He looked at Dave narrowly. "Dave, you hafta pass your bunk when you go below after chow for the wardroom. From now on keep *two* records, one under your mattress, one in the pantry."

The seed had sprouted and grew apace, and when the banquet was all removed to the rumpus room Al broke out his typewriter and wrote the letter. He'd always known someday he would *need* that typewriter.

Al wrote an indignant letter to Winfrey Fugate, champion of the enlisted man. He told how little the wardroom had paid for chow for April, May, June, and July, how much the general mess had gone into debt over the same period, and accused the officers of carrying more food ashore than they paid for in a month. He mentioned the party and the "surplus" Higgins had gloated about. And finally he accused the officers of robbing the general mess without remorse, without pity.

Doc and Yeoman Sam were playing checkers when he finished the letter Al put it before them without comment. "This is dynamite," Sam worried. But Al had it all figured out. This man Fugate would break the scandal over the air, without mentioning actual names and places (he always promised to protect his sources) and the officers would blanch and start sweating, and also start paying for the food. Once they knew some powerful guy like Fugate had the goods on them, they wouldn't dare steal any longer.

Al put another sheet in the typewriter and wrote a line to the effect that the undersigned were endorsing Al's sincerity,

sanity, and honesty, but were not otherwise involved. "I accept full responsibility for the charges made herein," Al typed heroically.

In grim silence Sam and Doc signed the voucher. And so did five other petty officers and four seamen.

AL MAILED the letter to Winfrey Fugate on August 17, and gingerly sat back to await results. The results were to be maddeningly slow in coming.

On August 22, with the ship just through the Cape Cod Canal on the return trip to Boston, the senior cook was awakened at nine hundred hours and solemnly informed that the skipper wished to see him on the bridge at once. Al felt a clammy hand of dread clutch at his heart. The letter! he thought, crawling groggily out of his bunk.

The skipper was sitting on his stool, arms folded, staring bleakly through the windshield, stony-eyed. Seaman Mike Kelly was helmsman, his eyes glued to the compass needle; Ensign Fineberg stood quietly by the other hatch curtain; Signalman Heatly lounged near the chartroom door. Al never did like audiences when he was getting chewed out.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked, a bit breathless.

"Yes," the skipper said, and he handed Al a sheet of yellow paper. "Radio message from the D.O., Woods. Copy of original telegram." And then the skipper, the helmsman, the ensign, and the signalman looked considerably away while Al learned that his father was dead.

The message did not say when or how Windy Woods died, but only that he was dead and the funeral was set for Monday, 1 P.M., August 24. The original telegram, as best Al could determine in the shock of the moment, had been signed by a person named Lester Potts. Dumbly Al read the message again, feeling no immediate pain but only dull shock, dismay, wear-

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ness and sleepiness, and desperate need for some hot coffee to awaken him and anesthetize his sore throat. All right, he thought dismally. O.K. He's dead, then.

"We'll be in Boston tonight," the skipper said. "You can have six days' emergency leave, Woods."

Al shook his head. "I won't be goin', sir," he said. He didn't know why he felt that way about it, but that was the way he felt. He couldn't go home if he had no home, could he?

"As you wish," the skipper said. "You have my condolences."

Al felt required to explain his reaction to the message. "It's just, well . . . he's dead," he muttered. "I can't do anything for him now. I'd just rather remember him like he was the last time I saw him, sir."

"As you wish, of course," the skipper said in his normal chill tones, but somehow the words reproached Al.

"Well," Al said. "Thanks, sir, for . . . well, thanks." And he turned and shoved the heavy storm curtain aside and left the bridge. He sat in the mess deck drinking black coffee and smoking a cigarette and staring blindly at nothing, feeling nothing, thinking nothing, no longer sleepy but still tired, still sore-eyed and sore-throated. Ought to get my tonsils out, he thought dully.

He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. It was Sam Goff. "I'm damn sorry, Al," he said.

"Thanks," Al said dully.

"I'll get your leave papers ready," Sam told him.

"No," Al said. "I'm not going."

"Oh," Sam said uneasily, "well . . . can I do anything, Al?"

"No," Al said. "Thanks."

The news got around and Al's friends found him staring blindly at nothing and thought it was numb grief and shock, and tried awkwardly, as men must do by custom and tradition, to say the miraculous words that would lighten the burdened heart. "Goddam, Al, I'm sorry," Doc said helplessly. Thanks, Al said stolidly.

He went back to the quarter-deck and the man on duty at the can racks said sorry, Al, and he said dully thanks. He passed the three-inch gun tub and a stranger said too bad, Al, you got my sympathy, I know how you feel, and he said thanks.

Stop saying you're sorry! he wanted to yell at them. What have *you* got to be sorry about? And what have *I* got to be sorry about? I'll tell you what. I'm the only one now. I'm alone now. I always *wanted* somebody, a father, a brother, a mother, a sister—I *still* want somebody, I'll *always* want somebody—but all I ever had was a vain strutting little man. If I grieve it's not because I lost a father, it's because I never *had* a father.

The seas worsened in the afternoon and there was no question of having anything but soup and sandwiches for evening chow. Al made sandwiches and a rich soup that was more like stew, and coffee, timing his movements to the lurching, careening gyrations of the ship.

Who'll bury him? Al wondered abruptly. Will they toss him in a hole in potter's field and scrape clods over him and call him buried? He sent me a genuine Kaywoodie pipe and a peck of cookies from that town. Will there be anybody at his funeral who gives a damn one way or the other? Lester Potts must be the undertaker. Will anybody pay Lester Potts? (Drop your old man a line sometimes, Hotshot.)

They'll talk about him like he was nothing, Al thought, staring blindly at the bulkhead. Somebody ought to see he gets a decent burial.

When supper was over he climbed all the ladders again and found the skipper still sitting gauntly on his stool, scowling stonily through the tear-wet windscreen.

"Sir," Al said dully. "I changed my mind. I want to go."

"All right," the skipper said. "We'll be in Chelsea in four hours."

"O.K. if I tell Goff to get the papers ready, sir?"

"The papers are already signed, Woods," the skipper said bleakly.

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THE PLANE left East Boston in the thin rain and climbed above the slate-gray clouds and flew toward New Jersey, but it soon went down through the clouds again and landed at an airport, and all of the servicemen were nervous, watching the cargo loading and unloading, and Al learned about the facts of ATC free-riding. Cargo had priority and he might get bumped by a crate at any airport along the way. After that, he only worried about getting to Oklahoma in time.

The town was bigger than he had supposed when he finally arrived with minutes to spare on the day of the funeral. It was big enough so that the bus station people did not know Lester Potts, and Al walked rather aimlessly along the tree-shaded sidewalk of the main street. He went into a drugstore and asked the girl soda jerk if she knew Lester Potts, and she said Les Potts was a barber, and worked at the Domino Barber Shop, on down about a block. Al went on down to the Domino and found it closed, with a small black wreath on the door. He hurried into a café and got the attention of a waitress and asked her if she knew where the funeral of Woods the barber was happening at. The waitress called to a woman named Opal, and Opal said Shannon Funeral Home was where Mister Woods's funeral was being held. The waitress told Al how to get there, and then said, "You his boy?" Al nodded dumbly, very tired and discouraged. "He ate here," she said awkwardly. "Sometimes. We were sure all sorry to hear he had passed away." Al nodded and thanked her and hurried out.

Two blocks. One over. He dogtrotted along the streets. He came to the corner and saw the high white funeral mansion ahead in a big grassy yard with a big neon sign. There were cars, which he did not associate with the funeral, and he ran faster, his breath sobbing through clenched teeth. He neared the wide lawn he heard the high thin wavering dirge, "Rock of Ages," rendered by scratchy female voices. He pounded across the street and across the lawn, and stopped.

I can't go in, he thought in despair. I can't go in like this,

all dirty and sweaty and needing a shave. I'm too late anyway. You can't just go busting into the middle of a funeral. I don't *want* to go in.

But he went in. Here was an empty, ornate reception room, and the awful singing was louder now and more horrible. A man came tiptoeing through a door to his left, eyebrows lifted questioningly. "Are you the son?" he whispered. Al nodded, panting, and the man shook hands, and said apologetically, "We didn't think you'd make it."

The undertaker urged Al on with soft insistent fingers on his sleeve, and Al dropped his ditty bag and followed the undertaker through another door into the front of the dim air-conditioned chapel. He took one horrified look at a swimming blur of faces as he removed his soiled white hat, and then he looked down at the floor. Behind him he heard snuffles and sobs and was furious. None of those free-lance mourners had any right here. They were intruders.

The weird threnody ceased at last and the preacher spoke gently of God's compassion for mortal sinners and of the beautiful peace of the hereafter. Al's groggy, incoherent mind must have napped a little, or else it was a very brief eulogy, because suddenly it was over and the pussyfooting embalmer was there grimacing with that rare and unreassuring solicitude, asking in sepulchral tones if Al would care to view the deceased. Al stumbled to his feet resignedly and moved toward the open coffin. And then abruptly all of the emotion he had so long scorned and repudiated found a chink in Al's tired and sleepy armor and banged up on him.

He was stricken with a terrible shame and remorse and guilt, knowing here at last that although he had not admired or respected his father, and had been scornfully intolerant of his father's human frailty, he had loved him. He felt his face twisting uncontrollably and felt the scalding pressure behind his eyelids, and he clamped his teeth hard and fought it savagely. But he was still less man than boy, and hot tears poured

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down his face as he stood helplessly stricken by the casket of his father, who had not been much of a father, perhaps, but had been the only father Alvin Woods would ever have; whose death left Al completely alone in the world of men, isolated, with no ties and no bonds of love and nobody to care if he had a birthday.

It was over quickly and he stood limp and exhausted, wiping his tear-streaked face with the wrinkled sleeve of his hot wool blouse, gazing with sorrow at the face of his father. I'm sorry, Pop, he thought. I was a worse son than you were father. I'm sorry I didn't try harder.

He turned away from the coffin and saw the woman who had been sobbing and was sobbing yet, and the man supporting her. The man sadly announced that he was Lester Potts. "I was his best friend, I reckon," he said. And then he gently drew the weeping woman forward. "This is Mrs. Webb. Arline Webb, a friend of your daddy." Al shook their hands, confused, not knowing why the woman should be so inconsolable. Arline Webb was a woman of middle age, still pretty in a worn fashion. Lester Potts was a lanky man with a mustache, and sad brown eyes. But they were strangers, people he had never seen before or known about.

He stood there looking warily and helplessly at the sad strangers. He didn't know what to do, and there was nobody to turn to for help.

And then he felt his sluggish heart soar with relief and surprise, because Josephine Hill stood at the side of the chapel watching him with shy, soft concern and compassion. It was impossible, he thought wildly; it was a trick of his exhausted mind, a figment of his anguished imagination.

But as he stared in disbelief, the well-remembered face was coming toward him, the gray eyes searching his face. She took his grimy, trembling hand in both of hers and said softly, "Hello, Al."

And he sighed with wrenching relief. He wasn't alone in a gray bleak sorrowing world of strangers after all. Jo was here.

WHEN the four of them returned to Arline Webb's big, old rooming house after the pitiless hot ordeal of the cemetery, Les Potts sighed heavily and said by godfrey he didn't think a good strong drink would be out of order, and he got a bottle from his car and went with Arline to the kitchen for ice, leaving Al alone with Jo for the first time.

"I'm filthy," he apologized, very self-conscious.

"You look fine," she said, but he sensed a shyness in her, and perhaps an uneasiness. He couldn't get over the wonder of her being here, even lovelier than he remembered.

"Jo," he stammered, "I just . . . I can't get over you being here."

She had told him in the car about seeing the notice of his father's death in the paper. She was still with the news-clipping service, having transferred to the Tulsa bureau, and it was part of her job to read all the regional dailies and weeklies. At first, she said, she had been terribly stunned, reading that Alvin Woods had died. Then she read the rest of the small item and realized that it must be Al's father, for it said an only son was in the Coast Guard. "I don't really know why I came," she said. "But I'm glad I did, Al. I guess I just wanted to see you."

She had come, that was all that mattered. She had eased the worst of the lost misery for him.

Lester Potts brought the drinks and said that Arline was freshening up, and he took the opportunity to enlighten Al. Windy Woods had lived here in this rooming house and he and Arline had planned to get married, Les said. All of the people at the funeral had been friends or regular customers of Windy's, he said. Everybody *liked* old Windy. The two elderly ladies who had done the singing lived upstairs.

Arline came back with the ravages of her grief hidden by fresh make-up, and Al knew a rush of feeling for her—she might have become his stepmother, if things had been different.

"Now you're to stay here as long as your leave lasts," Arline told him. "And Josephine must stay too, if she possibly can." Jo was looking at Al uncertainly, and he begged her with his

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eyes to stay, and she smiled a bit wryly and said she could stay the night, at least. So Arline took them back to see the rooms. Which, she said, were her guest rooms, never rented but kept available for relatives and friends. The two rooms were in the rear, on the ground floor. They returned to Arline's private sitting room, and when Les had mixed fresh drinks, Arline said if they would excuse her she would like to go lie down for a while.

So Les enlightened them some more, including Jo matter-of-factly, as if she were a member of the family. Al's father had died of a heart attack in the shop while cutting a man's hair and listening to a St. Louis Cardinal baseball game. And presently he stood up and said, "Well, I'll leave the bottle with you kids. How long can you stay around, Alvin?"

"I'll have to start back tomorrow," Al said, because he didn't want to stay here in this house where his father had lived, with these good people who had known his father better than he ever had.

Potts left, and he was alone with Jo again, and he wanted to touch her, to put his arms around her. He sighed. "Jo, I sure need a bath and a shave and a fresh uniform. Reckon Arline would have an iron handy so I could press my whites?" Jo volunteered for the job, and he gave her his folded dress whites and went to the bathroom. He took a shower and shaved quickly, and when Jo brought his uniform they began to talk, without self-consciousness, about the old days at OU. He felt presentable now, and her wifely pressing of his uniform seemed to have formed an easy, comfortable bond between them. Al brushed his teeth, listening to her through the bathroom door which was ajar, and tried to comb his hair, which was an impossibility. He was glad it was an inch long, at any rate. He would have hated for Jo to see him a month earlier. "Come on in," he said. "I'm presentable, I guess."

She came through the bathroom into his room and looked at him, smiling quizzically. "Right handsome," she commented. "You look real nice, Al." She was carrying her drink, which

she'd barely tasted, and he looked at her with his heart thumping in his chest, and took the drink from her hand and said, "Jo, would you mind if I kissed you?"

"No," she said breathlessly. "Shucks, no, Al."

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and felt the old rush of blood to his head and the pleasant dizziness that kissing Jo had always given him. Presently she pushed him away. "We'd better get out of here," she said and laughed shakily. "Nobody affects me like you do."

They went to the kitchen and made fresh drinks and talked, but he kept her close, his arm around her, and kissed her tentatively now and then. He felt a little guilty about being so pleasantly preoccupied so soon after his father's funeral. He told her about his feeling of remorse, how he kept thinking if only—if he'd only been friendlier, if he'd written oftener, if, if, if. And she said wisely that everybody tortured themselves that way when somebody died, thinking of all the ways they could have been kinder, more devoted, more attentive, more understanding.

At sundown they went to see if Arline would go to dinner with them, but she was crying again and said she couldn't eat a bite. Al was a little moody then, and during dinner of broiled steaks in a café, but it was no use. He talked about it to Jo and she held his hand and insisted that it was unnecessary to go around in mourning for the benefit of others, and useless to reproach himself if he didn't *feel* awful. "I guess that's why I'm here," she said softly. "To keep you from feeling so bad about everything."

They went back to the rooming house and found that Arline had gone to bed. So they went back to Jo's room, farthest from Arline's, where their talking would be least apt to disturb her. Al had a pounding anticipation in his blood, and he sensed that Jo was conscious of the tension. She looked at him a little uncertainly, and he pulled her to her feet and began to kiss her, and their mouths became bruisingly urgent. They had been far along this recklessly thrilling road before, and knew the way.

Afterward he held her tenderly, with a great feeling of love

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and pride, wanting nothing more than this but wanting it forever. "Jo," he said. "Jo, darling, let's get married."

She touched his chin with a tentative finger. "No," she said.

"Why not?" he asked. "Don't you know we belong together?"

"Oh, yessss!" she sighed. "You're the right person. You were always the right person, Alvin." And she added tenderly, "Maybe after the war . . ."

"After the war hell! Right away, baby! Now! Today!"

"You're sweet," she murmured. "But I don't want to be a lonely war wife, Al darling."

"Jo," he said. "Look, I've got four days to get back to Boston. Couldn't we be together, like this, until I hafta go back? Please?"

She stared at him soberly for a moment. "Well, why not?" she said. "I know I should have girlish regrets, but I'll never regret this, never."

They had breakfast with Arline and she said she would be glad to look after Windy's things until Al came "home" from the war, and she hugged Al in parting.

In Tulsa they registered brazenly in a first-class hotel as Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Woods, and they had a wonderful two days and two nights, and Al wanted desperately to marry Jo, and he pleaded with her to go back to Boston with him. But she was stubbornly adamant about the idea. She simply did not see any wisdom or logic in getting married in wartime. Let's wait, please, Al, she said. The war can't last forever, and I'll wait, and we'll write real often, and then . . .

The idyl cost Al a lot of money, but he had saved a lot of money by staying so long aboard ship. And what he got of loving delight and tender rapture couldn't be measured in terms of money.

He hated like fury to leave her, and in the end he overstayed, deciding to risk the uncertain ATC connections going back instead of a slowpoke train. But he had to go, finally, and his heart was lead in his chest. He was eight hours AWOL getting back to Boston. But the *Legume* didn't return to Chelsea Depot

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until the next day, and nothing was ever said about his tardiness. Maybe that was because the officers had other things to fret them, maybe they were a trifle wary of further offending Alvin Woods. Because there was a letter awaiting Al's return, a stupid letter that drove him to drink.

It was from Winfrey Fugate's secretary, and it was brief and shocking. It read: "Mr. Fugate has asked me to notify you that your letter has been received, and has been turned over to the proper authorities, and to say that he commends your courageous action." That was all, but gawd almighty wasn't that *enough*? Didn't that dumb cluck know that all mail to servicemen was *censored*? Didn't he know his stupid letter would be read by one of the *Legume's* officers? And that casual reference to the proper authorities—did he mean the FBI, the Treasury Department, or (God forbid!) the Boston District Office?

PART V

Hero

SEPTEMBER was a pain in the neck, a time of waiting for something to happen about the letter. And nothing at all happened about the letter except that it was pretty apparent the officers, most of them, knew a letter had been written, and were nervous and suspicious, and coldly, aloofly resentful.

Other things happened, things unrelated to the letter. There was a correction of a mistake in battle station assignments in September, when the exec informed Al sarcastically that he was no longer a 20-millimeter gun captain. "Cooks," Higgins said, "are by long tradition supposed to serve in the ammo magazine during GQ drills, and in the future that will be your station."

"I've been on that twenty since the ship was commissioned, sir," Al protested heatedly, and Higgins sneered and said, "I can't imagine why, and we won't argue about it. I believe I made myself clear."

There were transfers in the second week of September. Storekeeper George Osborn, who had done the books for the commissary department, came by the galley to say good-by. He was happy, at long last that much-yearned-for transfer to California had come through.

In September there were wild gales and towering seas, and the ship loaded her well deck with bagged coal and freighted it to the lighthouses and isolated surfboat stations along the rough New England coast, but as for letters, there were only the tender despairing ones Al wrote to Jo Hill, and her brief, wary, noncommittal, and exasperatingly *friendly* answers. He dwelt a great deal in his mind on the lovely short idyl with Jo, and

missed her with a constant melancholy ache. And to overcompensate the anguish, he became resentful sometimes, and cynical. O.K., maybe the Tulsa thing had only been a fling for Jo. Maybe illicit episodes in hotels were rather commonplace for her. Certainly it had not touched her deeply and lastingly as it had him; and obviously if she didn't love him now she would never love him.

Well, it was an anxious period everywhere, for that matter. The Navy disclosed that more than 2,301 officers and men of the merchant marine were dead or missing as a result of enemy action at sea up to August 1, and it might be assumed the score was higher now. When there was a GQ drill, Al would descend glumly to the magazine hatch in the crew's quarters and think with jealous longing of the clean cold air of the flying bridge and his darling useless 20-mm.

Transfers in September. But certainly. First Osborn. And then there was another transfer. The exec had persuaded the skipper to "get rid" of Ed Miller, Yeoman Goff reported. And Ed in person came to confirm the scuttlebutt. "You're talking to a civilian, my boy, so beware—the slip of a lip may sink a ship. They gave old Edwin another physical and the admiral has decided to mothball me," he said blandly, "For which I thank *you*, chef."

"You're welcome," Al said. Then, belatedly, "Why thank me, Ed?"

"For putting the heat on, chef. For making it advisable for certain parties to get rid of what might be called material witnesses."

"I halfway figured you were one of the mob," Al said wearily. "Ed, why did you let it keep happening?"

Old Ed jabbed a fat blunt finger at the gold hash marks on his sleeve. "The gold is for good conduct, chef," he rumbled softly. "I got them for saying yessir and nossir, not for arguing with superiors." He studied Al's pained features for a moment and added in an almost gentle manner, "You can't buck the system, chef, and you shouldn't ever try to. If you don't like

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your ship, ask for another ship, don't try to change the one you're on. Never do anything, chef, that might hurt your outfit. There are some good officers on this tub. The Skipper is a good officer, and some others *will* be good officers. And there are a couple of bad apples who taint the whole barrel, but you got to bear in mind they're not *real* Coast Guard, they're *reserves*, without any pride of tradition. They couldn't get in the Coast Guard except for the war and the lowered standards and the big hurry-scurry expansion. When the war ends they'll be civilians again, and the Coast Guard will still be the Coast Guard. An angry man trying to change things is in danger of doing more harm than good, chef. I know about the letter—I imagine everybody on the ship except the skipper knows about the letter. If he knew he'd have you on the rug talking your head off. If you had to mail a letter, you should have sent it direct to the D.O., not some dirt-shoveling outsider. But, then, you shouldn't have sent any letter in the first place. You should have gone to the skipper."

"The skipper," Al said scornfully. "He's a crook, too, Ed."

"Maybe not, chef, maybe not," old Ed rumbled. "Well, you've done what you thought you had to do, and no telling how far the bad smell will spread. It could hurt the service, chef. People outside wouldn't stop to consider these aren't real Coast Guard officers, they will just assume all Coast Guard officers are corrupt. You're not proud of being a Coast Guardsman, are you?"

"A Hooligan," Al said bleakly. "I can't say I am, Ed."

"Maybe you don't know much about the Coast Guard," Ed suggested. "Someday somebody's bound to ask me if I was a Hooligan, chef, and I'm gonna look him in the eye and say, quote: You're mighty goddam right I was a Hooligan, and I'm proud I was. Unquote."

And he left the ship as Osborn had done. Or, to put it another way, he dropped out of the case, as Osborn had done.

And along with all the tension and worry and dread, Al had to cope with a bewildering sense of guilt, of having burned a house to get rid of an annoying mouse in the pantry.

That was the first half of September, two weeks of tense ominous worried nail-biting apprehension. What could a man do? A man could get drunk.

He was trying to get drunk, the night Ed left, in a Scollay Square dive, when abruptly a pair of uncouth, sinister-looking Hooligans surrounded him and eyed him with evil intensity. One had a villainous black beard and a heavy pirate's ring in his ear, and a manner arrogant as sin. The other was swarthy and slim, with a blue-black spade beard and carefully waxed longhorn mustaches. And they were both vaguely familiar.

"Leave us git this cookie drunk an' shanghai him back to the ole schooner," one said arrogantly. And Al knocked his drink over lunging to his feet. "Gutsell!" he shouted. "And Blanket-ass! Well I be goddam, ain't you got no razors?"

Gutsell was a coxswain now, and the part-Choctaw yeoman was a first-class feather merchant. They were still on the *Algomotoc*, they said. They had been on the Boston-to-Halifax convoy run, they told him between drinks, but now the old tub was going to patrol the Bay of Massachusetts. "Because we got a tough reputation," Gutsell said arrogantly.

They put money in the kitty and drank, and told Al what a great old ship the *Motock* was, and what a great skipper old Theron Bennett was. "But we could use a cook or two," Blanket-ass said. "Red Wildoe hasn't improved a bit. He gets worse, if anything. And that boot camp buddy of yours, Charley Berger, is even worse than Red."

The conversation grew more disjointedly general, and Gutsell said, "Ole Red is fat as a pig. His wife don't allow him to grow a beard like us other Hoolies." Guts elbowed Al and winked and whistled lewdly, but Al wasn't sure he got it, or that Guts knew what he meant himself. Anyway, he didn't want to talk about Stella Wildoe. Or even think about her. She was an awful temptation sometimes, now that his hair had grown out again and Jo's letters were so pen-palish and everything. But he filed the information that the *Algomotoc* would be out for a week starting the next morning, while the *Legume* was slated to stay in for two or three more days, this trip.

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In September, with the wind cold off the North Atlantic and dread cold in a cook's mind, a guy was apt to dwell at some length on creature comforts, on snug and feverish pleasures.

And so, the next night, Al remembered a telephone number and got in touch with Stella, and met her in a bar in East Boston, and devoured her with his eyes while they drank, and was in turn consumed by her darkly wickedly languorous eyes. She had put on a little weight, just enough to make her look more voluptuously desirable, and presently they got into a taxicab and went back to Stella's apartment in Everett. Al refused to consider the moral aspects of the situation; he flatly refused to think of Red, and especially of Jo Hill.

But when they got inside the small untidy apartment, the very first thing he noticed was the large tinted portrait of Red Wildoe, and suddenly Al was sick of himself, sick of Stella.

"What's wrong, honey?" she asked, seeing his sick stare, and she came to him, alarm in her eyes, and pressed against him and kissed him, but his lips did not respond, although his body wanted to. "I'm sorry, Stella," he said. He walked to the bookcase and turned the picture of Red to face the wall, and looked at Stella like a starving man looks at food. But he didn't go back. It took all of his will power, but he was through with Stella for good. And he heard her dismayed wail as he hurried out the door.

He ran two blocks before he felt safe. He caught a bus and then a trolley and then the subway, and got off and walked aimlessly across the Common and entered the Buddies Club. But once inside he was no longer aimless. He got ten dollars changed into dimes and quarters and nickels, and got in a phone booth and put in a call to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"Keep trying," he told the operator when Jo did not answer, and he smoked up all his cigarettes and paced back and forth outside the booth, until twenty minutes of twelve o'clock. He was very angry now, shaking with nerves—probably out with some guy, no telling what all, he thought.

"Jo?" he said. "Where the heck have you been?"

She didn't answer immediately. Then, "Are you drunk, Al?"

"I am not drunk," Al said coldly. "I have only been tryin' to reach you for two hours. It's almost *midnight*."

"It may be midnight in Boston," she said, "but we happen to be on Central Standard Time here, my dear fellow. I've been to a movie."

And Al collapsed like a punctured balloon. "Jo," he said miserably, "Jo, baby—I hadda talk to you, I hadda hear your voice. Jo, I need you, I love you. I'm cold sober, an' I'm so lonesome I could shoot myself, an' I want you to come out here an' marry me, please. I need you bad, Jo baby. Please marry me."

"O.K.," Jo said very matter-of-factly.

"You will? You mean it? You're not kiddin' me, baby?"

"It'll take a few days to get organized," she said. "Listen, Alvin, you really want me to come? You do *really* love me?"

Al groaned. "What have I been sayin' all evenin'—you *know* that, honey. I *told* you. I love you more than . . . than anything."

"O.K., that's fine, darling," she said. "That's all I want to know. I suspect the feeling is mutual—I've missed you something awful, darling. I love you, too—I'd *better* love you if I'm gonna marry you." She laughed a trifle wildly. "Well, look, hang up now, darling, and I'll write. And you behave yourself, you hear? Bye, darling Alvin."

Al hung up and slumped against the wall of the phone booth until he regained his shattered composure. Oh, man! he thought. It's O.K. now. Everything is gonna be all right now. Jo's coming.

NEXT MORNING the *Legume* loaded bright new buoys, lashing them snug to the well deck. And on the next day she unmoored at six hundred hours and headed for outer Cape Cod, to swap the new buoys for old, barnacled, rusty ones. Outside Boston Harbor, outside the nets, the skipper set course for the upper tip of the Cape and had a GQ drill to tauten up the crew. Which was how it happened that they discovered

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Seaman Peter Irvin had taken French leave; had jumped the ship; had gone AWOL. There was no gunner for the starboard twenty, but only a loader and a third crewman known locally as a "utility infielder." The irate skipper summoned Fineberg, the gunnery officer, and Higgins, the exec, to the bridge. Al, who was sweating down in the magazine at the time, learned of the interview later.

"Who is gunner on that starboard twenty?" the skipper growled.

Fineberg, grimly: "The exec should answer that, sir."

Exec: "Seaman Peter Irvin is supposed to captain that gun. It appears he, ah, jumped ship, sir. He isn't aboard."

Skipper: "Why was that muck-up put on a gun in the first place?"

Gun Officer: "Mr. Higgins assigned him, over my protest."

Skipper: "How long have you been assigning gun crews, Higgins?"

Exec: "It was just temporary, sir . . . until Fineberg could find . . ."

Skipper, harshly: "Who was formerly on that gun, Mr. Fineberg?"

Fineberg: "Woods, the cook, sir. Since the beginning. When we first made up the gun crews I checked everybody for the guns, sir, and Woods had better reflexes and co-ordination for the twenties than anybody on the ship. He's a good gunner, sir. I've seen him up there in his spare time practicing, tracking imaginary targets, acquiring the skill that was evident on the firing range. He's a good gunner, sir."

Skipper, bluntly: "Get Woods back up there. And, Mr. Higgins, may I suggest you confine your brilliant inspirations to your own department in the future? Mr. Fineberg is the gunnery officer, is that clear?"

So Al went racing up all the ladders, delighted to escape from the sinister airless tomb of the magazine, and strapped himself into the familiar harness and patted the useless 20-mm. affectionately. "Old Al's back, baby," he said, and grinned fiercely

at his loader, grinning Country Boy Bagley, and the utility loader, Seaman Smith. They hadn't liked old Irvin worth a hoot, Country Boy said. It was great to be back on the high clean windy flying bridge.

For three rough days the *Legume* hoisted rusty, barnacled buoys out of the breaking seas and patiently maneuvered under the skipper's gentling hands so that she could put the new buoys over the side precisely where they were supposed to go. She finished her risky chores off Monomoy Point by early afternoon of Saturday, the nineteenth of September. That night she ran into the harbor of Orleans and anchored, ready to shove off at dawn for Chelsea Creek. But long before daybreak she was under way on another course, lumbering north and east into peril—at twelve knots.

Al was in the crew's head reading newspapers when the running and shouting occurred outside in the passageways. Then he heard the muffled thunder of the Diesels coming to life, and the bosun's pipe eerily calling, and he left the litter of newspapers and hurried below to get his windbreaker and watch cap and life jacket. Then he went racing topside to find out what was happening.

It was after midnight when he went scrambling up the sheer ladder to the flying bridge, hearing the voices of men on the laden well deck and forward on the foc'sle. He leaned over the rail, just above the starboard bridge wing, and heard the skipper there under him snapping orders. He heard Higgins's worried voice.

"What's up, Captain?" the exec panted, and Al noted that Higgins was the only man aboard who affected to call the skipper "Captain."

"Theron Bennett's ship is sinking out there!" the skipper said harshly. "Torpedoed! We can be there by daylight, but I pray God somebody faster heard the SOS and gets to him a lot sooner."

Al Woods felt the blood grow cold in his veins, and suddenly it was unbearably lonely there in the dark on the flying bridge,

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and he went back down the ladders to get the keys from the O.D. They would need strong black coffee tonight, and sandwiches.

The skipper seldom bothered to let the crew know what was going on, but this time he did, this time he passed the word. It was a rescue mission. The *Algomotoc* was sinking or had sunk out there somewhere in the Atlantic night, and they were going after survivors. All hands must be fully dressed and wearing life jackets. He ordered lookouts posted in the bow, the stern, bridge wings, flying bridge, and in the crow's nest. Look sharp! he told them. He ordered full crews on the depth charges, the Y-gun, and the three-incher. The crew's mess was to be readied for emergency first aid, the CPO's quarters would be used as a sick bay for survivors.

Al thought with sorrow of all those men he had known on the *Skedeelia*; he could not bear to think that they might be drowning at this very moment, crying out for help with strangling words no one could heed.

He went back up to the flying bridge and stared into the darkness where the pitching and rocking ship was going as fast as her heavy cargo would let her. Clouds scudded westward before a cold thin wind, and sometimes the moon's full, treacherously bright face peered down through breaks and rents in the scuff, and he thought, with a shiver, that men called it a "hunter's moon," because this was the kind of night when U-boats liked to prowl on the surface looking for easy silhouetted targets. It was also the kind of unnerving night when the creamy crests of the long swells looked like torpedo trails, and torpedo trails looked like creamy breaking wave crests. Or so he had heard. This ship did not often run at night, and *never* went northeast at night into the wide, endless, ominous Atlantic.

IT WAS almost morning now, after four-thirty. Al dozed and didn't know what woke him, but heard the scuffling

and scurrying and the curt voices. And then he heard the new sound from the bridge, the excited *pinng-ping! pinng-ping!* of the sound gear, and he came fully awake. The sound gear was getting a bounce, an echo; it had made contact with some solid object in the water—maybe the *Algomotoc*, Al hoped, stumbling to his feet. He found his flak helmet and removed the cover from his gun and got a heavy clip of shells out of the ready box, and attached the lanyard, and had the starboard 20-millimeter aircraft gun ready for firing when Country Boy and Seaman Smith came scrambling sleepily over the railing in answer to the GQ alarm that had awakened him. It wasn't day-break yet, but there was a grayness in the world, and you could see the horizon, as the ship changed course so the seas began to break heavily against her side, causing her to wallow far over. Al swung the gun outboard a little, figuring maybe if there was anything to shoot at the ship's rolling list would depress the muzzle far enough to get in a few rounds. Faintly below he heard the chilling *pinng-ping!* that meant the unknown object was closer.

"Wot's happenin'?" Seaman Smith panted, and Al said he didn't know, and the ship came on around, so that the seas broke against her stern, and held a steady course, and the sound gear was going: *Ping-Ping! Ping-Ping! Ping-Ping!*

Al heard the shouted orders and repeats and the initial *blap* of the Y-gun on the quarter-deck, but still the explosions startled him and shocked him and he winced. The heavy ship shuddered from stem to stern as the sea tore open behind her and off both quarters, and then the rest of the diamond pattern let go in the creamy wake and the white ghostly waterspout rose high against the gray darkness and the ship shook again from the impact as the depth charges exploded deep in the ocean. The skipper brought her around again and made another run with the sound gear for his guide and laid down another pattern of destruction, and the ocean erupted again in great blossoming fountains. A third time the *Legume* attacked her unseen adversary hiding in the depths, tearing the ocean apart.

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But when she completed the second loop of her figure-eight course and came down the foaming lane again there was only the steady, regular *pinnng* again, and no echo at all. And there was a great greasy bubbling spread of black oil on the gray water, and Chief Bosun's Mate Huxley was ready to shove a red nun buoy overside to mark the spot. And the men were ready to cheer shakily and triumphantly, because now they could claim title to an oil slick in the Atlantic that might, just possibly, mean there was a dead U-boat down there in the muck.

It was daylight now, gray and gloomy, and the thin rain fell coldly into the endless gray-green wastes of the Atlantic. Up in the crow's nest it was pretty rough going for Waxey Franks.

It was Waxey who spotted the men first. "On the bridge!" he howled, forgetting his phone, and the C.O. lunged onto the bridge wing and looked up, and Waxey bawled, "Objects in the water twenty degrees off the port bow, sir!"

It was a life raft, and men in the water, and they were from the *Algomotoc*. There had been seventy-two men and officers on the *Motock*; there were forty here all told, clinging to the raft or scattered in the area in their soggy life jackets. Of these forty only twenty-three still lived. Forty-nine men of the ill-starred *Algomotoc* were dead or missing.

The *Legume* made a juicy target, moving slowly, sometimes almost stopping dead in the water; and the skipper kept shouting for the lookouts to keep a sharp watch, dammit, and never mind what was going on down there on the well deck!

The skipper scoured the area for an hour, risking eternity, but the two more men they found were dead, making nineteen under the foc'sle. And finally, reluctantly, the skipper abandoned the hunt and set course for Provincetown.

"We're not home yet by a heck of a lot," the skipper advised.

He was right. Shortly after nine-hundred-hours, Waxey Franks, still in the high crow's nest, began to bawl and squall wildly, and pointed a trembling finger off to port. "SSSS . . .!" he stuttered, and finally got it out in a scream, "SUBMARINE!"

The skipper saw the pointing hand and gave a sharp order and the helmsman brought the ship around to port, going at full speed, and the *Legume* laid far over to starboard in a deep slippery trough. The deep roll had caught Al by surprise and thrown him off balance, swinging down in an arc in the gun harness, and he had dragged the gun around so that it was aimed at the sky. Now he was clawing back up the slippery wet tilted deck to get the gun aimed forward.

He got the gun around and planted his feet on the slanting deck and suddenly froze in icy astonishment and horror. Al had never seen a submarine before—except a half-built American sub in shipyard—but he was seeing one now with men in its conning tower and its stern under water and its ugly shark-snout bow thrusting up out of the waves. He was shaken by the sight, unmanned, chilled to his marrow, his knees weak and rubbery. But most incredible fact of all, he was seeing it through the gun's sight, right on target, zeroed in, dead in the cross hairs. He didn't believe it, the twenty wouldn't depress that far; then he realized it was only because of the ship's deep starboard list. And he just braced there on the slanting deck with his muscles quivering and his mouth open.

Somebody down on the bridge wing could yell. "It's our sub, the one we ash-canned! She's crippled, we hit it good, sir!"

Men were yelling below, some with alarm, some with vehemence, and some even with purpose and logic, but Al continued to watch with rigid hollow fascination in that brief but endless span of time, seeing the sub coming nearer just off the starboard bow. Abruptly a machine gun began to hammer down on the bridge wing, and almost at the same instant it was answered from the sub's conning tower, and over the loud racket of firing Al heard the bloodcurdling scream of steel-jacketed slugs ricocheting off the hull of the cutter and smashing into flat surfaces with loud sledge-hammer blows. Suddenly the glass of the huge searchlight lens exploded, spraying glass all over the flying bridge, and Al came out of his catatonic shock.

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He swung the twenty and got the sub's deck gun in the sights and saw its muzzle blossom flame and heard the ear-splitting *wham!* of the gun itself and almost immediately, far aft, the explosion of the shell that had missed the plunging *Legume*. And he started firing the twenty.

He was aware, vaguely, that the rest of the men on the flying bridge had thrown themselves flat on the deck, except for Country Boy who clung frantically to the right-hand gun shield. He didn't believe this was real, but the cold rain on his face was real, and the acrid fumes were real. And the deathly silence when the drum went empty was real, too.

"Reload!" Al yelled, and Country Boy unfroze and got a fresh clip out of the ready box and climbed back up the steep incline like a somnambulist. "Move!" Al yelled, and then, logically enough, the gunnery officer was there on the flying bridge, briskly removing the empty drum as Al pulled the release, slapping the full heavy one into place, helping Al cock the twenty again. Fineberg's face was bloodless under his gray flak helmet, but he had control of himself, and he slapped Al on the back and pointed at the sub, now scarcely a hundred yards away, and Al began firing.

There were hoarse yells below and the constant banging of the machine gun on the bridge wing. And dimly Al realized that the port twenty was thudding away and saw from the corner of his eye Ensign Fineberg firing the gun alone. His own tracer bullets and the winking trajectories from the port twenty converged on the sub's deck gun and conning tower, and he saw the dark figures on the U-boat jerking from impact and crumpling and one, trying to run to the conning tower, stumbling and falling into the sluicing seas. And then the wallowing, silent U-boat was sliding below his cross-hairs as the distance dwindled to nothing and Fineberg shouted, "Hang on, men, we're going to ram her!"

The machine gun on the wing below kept firing short stuttering bursts after the twenties quit, and men were yelling every where to stand by for collision; at the last minute the skipper

called for stop engines and reverse engines and the twin screws under the cutter's stern churned in reverse. When the cutter's heavily reinforced ice-breaker bow smashed into the sub's pressure hull between the conning tower and the snout-like bow with a grinding, rending, jarring crash, it sounded to Al like the end of the world. He was braced stiffly but the impact hurled him bruisingly against the gun butts and twisted him around, sliding down the tilted deck, and he hung groggily in the harness.

The machine gun spoke again in short bursts as the buoy tender backed away, coming about to face the seas and beginning to move ahead past the stern of the mortally wounded submarine, which was listing to starboard. When the *Legume* was barely fifty yards distant her three-inch gun aft began to slam ear-splitting rounds into the disabled sub, and the conning tower was ripped and blasted and laid waste. This time there was no room for doubt as the U-boat slid lower and lower, her snout rising briefly then wallowing under. The Hooligan Navy had got an Axis hearse for sure—but the skipper was a methodical man, and he sent some ashcans down to insure the workmanship of the job.

The men yelled themselves hoarse with delirious triumph, until they remembered all the dead and missing of the *Algomotoc*, and then they shouted hoarse blasphemies and obscenities after the plummeting enemy craft, and swore to take vengeance on others like it.

The skipper got the seas on her stern again and the damage control party found only a minor rip and a lot of indentations in the sturdy bow; they stuffed a collision mat in the rip and closed off the forward watertight holds. And down in the engine room the men who had sweated out the fight and collision unable to see or know what was going on babied the Diesels into giving a little extra speed, and the old Hooligan Battleship *Legume* ran for home with lopsided, canted arrogance and pride.

At ten hundred and zero five hours an old U.S. four-stacker destroyer, now property of the British Admiralty, came over

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the misty horizon and patrolled around the *Legume* while she slowed to a walk in the pelting rain to tidy her cargo and trim ship and get everything battened down in Hooligan fashion again. The limey ship had a doctor aboard and hove to upwind to send him in a bobbing boat to look after the injured survivors. And when a sleek lean lethal-looking Coast Guard patrol cutter with *North Atlantic* written all over her came out of the gray rain and joined up around noon, the skipper finally secured battle stations. Let the limeys and the U.S. Coast Guard worry now, the tired old Hooligan Navy needed a rest and dry gear, and something to eat.

Al got out of his gunner's harness and lay down on the deck of the flying bridge and cried like a baby from reaction. Not because he had stinging cuts on his left leg and left cheek from flying glass, and aching ribs and raw shoulders from being slung around in the harness of his gun, but because he was all torn up in his mind and soul. He was mourning the dead of the *Algomotoc*, but he was also grieving for the faceless, nameless human beings he had stitched with the thread of winking death from his gun, watching them jerk and sag and crumple with cold horror in his mind.

"You did what you had to do, Al," Fineberg said. Fineberg knew how it felt too, Al thought, wiping his face on his wet jacket sleeve. "Come on down out of the rain."

So Al went down to his bunk, ignoring the excited dissonance of everybody loudly and exuberantly retelling his vital part in the big battle of the Atlantic. He got out of his wet itchy clothes and went to the showers and washed the stink of fear and cold sweat and horror off of him, and then he went back and got into cook whites. He went up to the galley and unlocked it and began dumping canned vegetables into the electric stock pot. It was good to be a cook again instead of a killer.

He made a fresh urn of coffee while the mess cooks cleaned up the mess deck and started putting up the tables again. He sent Country Boy down to the storeroom for canned fruit and

more canned milk, and more salami and some cheese to dull the crew's hunger until the stew could get done.

And then he had run out of things to help him procrastinate, and couldn't stall any longer, and so he went back to the chiefs' quarters where the survivors had been put to bed. He found Blanket-ass, staring blankly at the springs of the bunk above him. "Hello, buddy," Al said, and the yeoman turned dark, beady, dead eyes on him and his lips moved soundlessly. Al patted him awkwardly, not knowing what else to do, and turned away, dreading to look further. But he found Gutsell immediately. Tough, cocky Gutsell looked at him with hurt, questioning eyes, pale under his beard.

"Hello, cooksie," he croaked raggedly. "Where we headed?"

"I guess we're goin' on to Boston," Al said, having heard that.

"I figured Boston," Guts said. And he shut his eyes tight and said, "We wasn't tough enough when it come time." And tears ran down his cheeks into his fierce, matted beard.

Al located Berger, fatter than he remembered, but his face hard and cynical under the fat; the pale blue eyes were like windows with dead winter behind them. "Hello, Charley boy," Al said, and Berger's tough Cicero, Illinois, face came around, bleak and doughy, and he said, "Okie, ya jerk, wotta youse doin' here?"

"This is my ship," Al said, feeling a strange pride in the words. "This is the old Lagoon," he said. And abruptly the glass shattered in the wintry eyes and Berger looked around at the double bunks, and Al followed his aching glance and saw that almost none of the upper bunks were occupied. And Berger said pleadingly, "Where'd youse take all dem others? Where's all the guys? Scattered around, huh? In other compartments, huh, Okie?" And then a little wildly, "Some other ship picked 'em up, maybe. *Tell* me sumpin, ya dumb jerk! Where's all de other *Motock* guys at?"

"Some other ship," Al said thickly, and turned away.

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Al left the CPO's quarters and found a weary Dave Hubert in the galley, and Al thought, There are five more of them somewhere. But he knew they were dead, five unlucky dead ex-friends of his, and he said, "Skipper had anything to eat since we left Cape Cod last night, Dave?"

Dave shook his head. "Just coffee, far's I know, Al."

"He oughta eat something," Al said. "Milk toast, maybe."

"I'll fix some," Dave said tiredly. "He rates something special, don't he, Al? He's the head tomcat in my book from here on in."

Al nodded, he knew that now. Old Tom Fox, forty-nine years old and with a duodenal ulcer and a bad habit of taking nine-dollar hams, a man of vast icy scorn and intolerance for stupidity and incompetence, who could sit forever on a bridge stool like a stony-eyed old hawk, grim, bleak and kind of inhuman—old Tom Fox had more guts and knowledge and ability than any man alive. He didn't have to live by the petty rules of others—heck, let him have all the hams he wanted. After today, let him take the whole ship up the street, boy.

OLE ONIONS, they insisted, was a real, genuine, bona fide hero. But Al Woods knew better. In the days immediately following the great fight, he was sick and appalled to find that the unanimous heroes of the U-boat sinking were Lieutenant Thomas Fox (for unhesitatingly turning his lumbering inadequate ship to attack the sub—with either incredible courage or incredible foolhardiness) and Cook-gunner Alvin Woods (whose coolness under fire, and quick unerring deadliness with the 20-millimeter gun, had kept the sub's lethal deck weapon from being effective) and Ensign Hog Cupper (who stood on the bridge wing with a hot, heavy machine gun cradled in his arms, firing and yelling Texas war cries that unnerved the enemy) and Ensign Fineberg (for manning the port twenty when he realized the ship's deep starboard list had made the

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usually ineffective antiaircraft guns murderously effective for once).

Al Woods was not the hero type. The mantle of notoriety hung uneasily from his slumped shoulders, and his haunted heart rejected all the kudos. Fate had played a grotesque trick on him at last, making his useless old twenty briefly and traumatically useful. He had acted automatically, while scared out of his wits.

After the grim business of unloading the *Algomotoc's* survivors and dead, and her cargo of battered buoys, the *Legume* had laid alongside an ammunition barge to unload her explosives, and then had gone directly to dry dock for repairs. That first night, on orders from the D.O., nobody was allowed to go up the street, and in the morning a high-ranking official came aboard and spoke gravely to the ship's personnel at a special muster. He commended them, but then he spoke of the vital need for complete silence and secrecy. They mustn't mention the *Algomotoc*, or the U-boat. And the skipper drew a nervous laugh by stating that nobody would ever believe such a wild story anyhow. And then *he* commended the men. He told them he was just tremendously proud of every man aboard. "We were very lucky," he said, "but when we got a few breaks, we exploited them efficiently, I thought."

He was cheered lustily by the Hooligans. Great ole Tom Fox.

Afterward everybody got liberty, and nearly everybody got drunk, but although Al's body and tongue became almost helpless, his mind remained starkly sober and his conscience refused to give him any respite.

The letter from Jo should have helped. Maybe it helped a little. He got it that morning, and it was a fine letter. She wrote: "My dear darling Alvin: I can hardly wait, I simply ache to be with you, sweet Alvin, but I must let common sense rule my palpitating little old heart for once. The boss said if I'd stay on long enough to train a new girl he would give me a month's wages as a wedding bonus, and I've found a buyer for my Ford—six hundred dollars! We'll be rich!!! I must spend a week or

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so with Mom and Dad, poor things, who are horrified about the whole business, but resigned and pathetically sweet. I keep telling them they aren't losing me, they're gaining *you*. Meanwhile, dearest Al, you be finding us a cozy nest in dear old Boston, and I'll write more in a few days with statistics, time of arrival, et cetera. I am simply giddy with happiness, out of my mind to see you again. Love, Jo." It was the best letter *she* ever wrote, and ordinarily it would have had him walking around in a happy trance, but now in a way her letter kind of canceled out, because it reminded him forcefully of the other letter.

I don't want anything to happen about the letter! he thought with dismay. Not now. Not after what we all went through together. That isn't important any more, it's beside the point now. I hope nothing *happens*.

The ship was in dry dock three days while her bow was repaired. On the fourth morning the dry dock slid down its tracks and the ship floated free, and the skipper took her to a dock in the Navy yard and moored her. Nobody knew why, until the delegation of officers from the D.O. came aboard, and at first it was rumored the *Legume* was to be given a unit citation at a special muster.

But it was in reality a Board of Inquiry. And it seemed to have nothing at all to do with the letter.

Al was on duty in the galley when the three officers and two enlisted men came aboard and marched back to the wardroom, and he had a sick, queasy feeling. Here they are, he thought shakily. Here's where we destroy a proud ship, boys.

But when they started calling the men back to the wardroom in alphabetical order, and a seaman named Arrington returned along the passageway, relief set in. "It's about Pete Irvin," he said. "They picked him up AWOL and he jumped ship because this here's a slave ship, or somethin'. They're investigatin' about him desertin', that's all."

Machinist Red Baker reported the same thing.

Seaman Dusak reiterated, "They tryna fin' out about Irvin."

ONIONHEAD

Seaman Peter Irvin, the one who would have killed Germans with a 20-millimeter gun if he hadn't gone over the hill, jumped ship, taken French leave, gone AWOL; Irvin was in the brig, the Shore Patrol had picked him up. And in truth, this inquiry progressed with great rapidity.

Brewer, Bordeaux, Boskwitz. And Burns, a radioman who had signed the letter. Burns was a little pale when he came back. He got coffee and looked at Al and grinned. "Whew!" he said. "Well, relax, Onions. It ain't got a thing to do with the letter, but only Pete Irvin."

"Then how come Country Boy didn't get called back yet?" Al asked. Bagley should come before Brewer, Bordeaux, Boskwitz, or Burns. Maybe it was an oversight. Or because Bagley was busy. Al went down to his locker and got the Manila envelope.

Kafferhamp, Kelly, Kritikos . . . Lang, Lewis, Lofton; Marsh, Melchamin, McCafferty . . .

They didn't call Curly Matoli! Al thought with a growing sense of doom and inner panic.

Naylor, who had signed the endorsement to the letter, came back shaking with relief. "All about one Peter Irvin, deserter," he said.

They didn't call Miller, either, Al said to himself. Because old Ed by strange coincidence is no longer on active duty. And they won't call Osborn, because George is in sunny California.

Phillips, Potter, Qualls, Quinn, Rabinsohn, Radovich . . . Salo, Sadwick, Schlemmer . . . Sparlin, Steuben, Sullivan, Sweet, Tanner, Tate . . . Ubbevale, Ulowitz, Vann, Vestings . . . Vickers, Ward, Webbley . . .

Al felt like yelling. He was all knotted up inside.

Wheeler, White, Whittle, Wollaker . . . (Now! Al thought sickly.) Yates, Yellowhorse, Zane, Zellin. All right, Al thought resignedly. I guess that's plain enough. They skipped old Al Woods, boy. They're savin' the best for the last.

There was a considerable lag in the proceedings, and Al busied himself in the galley. It was almost eleven, time to start

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getting ready for the early watch-standers. He tried to breathe normally, but it seemed to him normal breathing lately was panting.

MATOLII said the bailiff of the inquisition.

Al listened to the sodden clamor of his heart. Go ahead, you guys, lie some more, tell me this isn't about that goddam letter!

Curly didn't come back to the mess deck at all, and Al's summons caught him unprepared, not ready yet, not steeled to it. *WOODS!* howled the foghorn trumpets of judgment. *LAY AFT TO THE WARDROOM!*

His face felt hot and his hands were damp and clammy. The wardroom door was shut and he rapped and gritted his teeth. The door was opened by Dave Hubert, and Dave's eyes tried to send him a swift message, but Al didn't read it at all. He stepped inside, very conscious of the Manila envelope under his waistband, under the apron. He removed his hat.

The Board of Inquiry people were at his left, the officers in casual, relaxed poses in the leather chairs, the yeomen straight and noncommittal and efficient over their shorthand pad and typewriter.

"State your name and rank," a visiting officer said briskly.

"Alvin Woods, ship's cook, first class, sir."

"How long have you been on this ship, Woods?"

"Since before it was commissioned, sir."

They asked a great many curious questions. How long had he been rated? Where else had he cooked? Had he gotten his promotion to first class on this ship? Do you know a Seaman Peter Irvin? Yessir. Did you know he had gone AWOL? Yessir. Did you know why he went AWOL? Nossir. Don't you even have a theory about it? Nossir.

"Irvin claims the food was very bad sometimes, Woods."

"He always griped about everything," Al said gruffly.

"Then you mean the food was never bad, is that it?"

"We got some bad buys from the Navy Commissary Warehouse," Al said evasively. "They sold us some pretty sorry junk sometimes, sir." I'm quibbling, he thought. I'm mealy-mouthed.

How come, boy? Why don't I just hand these guys my little compendium of notes? he wondered.

"Would you expand that a bit, Woods? Sorry junk, you say."

Al found himself deeply involved in a rather assinine discussion of Overseas hams and bacon, foul link sausages, gray hamburger meat, too much too-fat "stewing and boiling" beef. He glanced at Skinny Scraggs and saw the ensign's miserable blush of embarrassment, and threw him a straw of pride to clutch at. "Sir, if it's not out of line, I just like to say I think we'd be a lot better off buyin' from Army Commissaries, gettin' beef by the carcass an' stuff like that."

"Then, as I understand it, you attribute the former bad chow on this ship to the quality of foods purchased from the Navy, is that it?"

"That's some of it," Al said. "We had to cut down on expenses."

"Why was that, Woods?" the obtuse officer inquired.

"The general mess was in the hole, sir."

The obtuse officer backed away from that. "This Irvin," he said. "Did he complain about the *quality* of the cooking, Woods?"

"He complained about everything, sir."

"Would you say the cooks were ever at fault, Woods?"

Al saw the opening, but he ignored it. He was beginning to catch on, all right. If anybody mentioned any letters, it was up to him. If anybody said anything about the officers' cheating, it was his big line of dialogue, all they intended to do was feed him cues. He said in regard to the possibility of cooks having been at fault, "Any cook has a bad day now and then, turns out a poor chow, sir. You talked to everybody else on the ship before you got around to me. If they said my cookin' was lousy, I'll go along with that."

The officer let his breath out slowly. "How do you prepare your menus on this ship, Woods?" he wondered. "Who plans the menus?"

"Ordinarily, sir, the chief steward does it," Al said. "Or the

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senior cook. An' then the commissary officer checks it an' O.K.'s it."

This led into a rather involved and, Al felt, pointless discussion of balanced diet, variety, and other technical stuff.

"Now, Woods," the moderator said suavely, "would you say the food *formerly* was bad enough to justify Irvin's going AWOL?"

"Sir, I don't think anything justifies anybody goin' AWOL" Al said virtuously, and the officer looked faintly baffled for a moment. Finally he said carefully, "Could there have been, err, other factors involved in the, ah, lower standard of chow here, Woods?"

They want me to just bust out and accuse the officers, Al said to himself. They had to come here because of the letter, but they don't necessarily want to find out anything on the wardroom gang. They'd lots rather find out I'm a mutinous, insubordinate crackpot and the letter was a big lie—only they're afraid I'm not and it wasn't. Why are they so damn *stealthy*?

And then it came to him. This ship is a symbol now, some kind of proud symbol, a dungaree Navy vessel that killed a submarine, and proved the Coast Guard had guts and that Americans can whip Germans just by sheer courage and aggressiveness, or something. After last Sunday the old *Legume* is a legend, and these guys don't want to be disillusioned about her, they don't want to know it if she has a blot on her escutcheon. They want to protect her from scandal.

And so do I! he thought with sudden anguish. I don't want to hurt this ship, or any of the officers. Except Higgins, damn him. He's all that's really wrong with this ship. We got a great old vessel here except for Higgins, and I don't want to foul her up. If they ask me, I'm gonna blame the whole thing on slobberin' Dennis.

But a question, a very dangerous question, had been asked, and he looked at the Board officers and somehow got the feeling they were holding their collective breath. By God! Al thought. I'll play it their way, I'll pretend it's all about Pete Irvin.

"Nossir," he said. "Not that I know of, sir."

And the ship's officers stirred, like men reprieved might stir.

"Do you believe he deserted because of the food situation, Woods?"

"Nobody else did, sir," Al said gruffly.

After that they seemed a little at a loss. The three of them leaned close and murmured and shook their heads and studied their notes, letting Al fidget, and shook their heads again.

"Well, then, Woods, I guess that's all. You may go. Thank you."

Don't thank me, Al thought grimly, turning toward the door.

But it wasn't really over yet. "Oh, one moment, Woods!" the spokesman said briskly. And Al's blood chilled as he swung around. "Perhaps we overlooked some, ah, aspect of the general mess situation," the conscientious officer said, frowning at the deck. "Is there anything you'd like to volunteer about . . . anything?"

Until that moment, Al wasn't really sure they knew about the letter. There was no certainty the letter had been turned over to the D.O. But now Al knew with cold reason that these officers had the letter with them, knew all about it, and in conscience had to ask this last open-door question.

Al looked at the *Legume's* officers. The skipper, old stone face in person, his flinty eyes betraying no nervousness, no emotion. The engineer, Warrant McFarland, puzzled, uncomprehending, thinking about his Diesels, completely uninvolved with any of this. Al's questing glance went to Executive Officer Dennis Higgins, whose normally beet-hued face was the color of cream of tomato soup, whose eyes were splintery with hatred and menace.

All they need to do is look at him, Al thought, and felt a hot surge of heady triumph. Ever since the first day I came aboard this ship I've hated his supercilious, overbearing, stupid guts. He's had me and Curly in a tight squeeze for months, but now I got *him* in the vise, boy.

Al got the Manila envelope from under his apron. And

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suddenly saw the flicker of the skipper's eyes, the fleetin, mercurial sadness. Wait a minute! Al thought, looking at the skipper. I don't want to hurt *him*. Maybe he's done a little cheating himself. And even if he hasn't it'll hurt him; he's responsible for the actions of his officers, he'd be splattered by the tar; it's his ship, if I break this off in Higgins it'll reflect on the skipper who let him get away with his cheating. I can't hurt one without hurting them all!

He looked once more at Higgins, whose eyes were sick and desperate on the Manila envelope. Crawl, you snake, Al thought. Faint with fright, goddam you! But, strangely, he felt pity, too.

Sighing, Al Woods walked over to the *Legume's* officers, sitting there like a jury, or like a group of dishonored men about to be photographed for the dishonor files. Al looked at the skipper's bleak face and thought that his own must be equally bleak, and he handed the envelope to Lieutenant Thomas Fox, a great man whether he paid for his canned hams or not. The skipper took it, his eyes stony and unreadable on Al's face. Nobody spoke. It seemed to Al that ten minutes had gone by since anybody spoke in the charged atmosphere of the wardroom. His own throat felt raw and thick, and his voice was scratchy.

"Nossir," he told the Board of Inquiry and its yeomen and the seven worried officers of a heroic, foolhardy, waddling, inadequate buoy tender that had had the incredible effrontery to attack a U-boat head on. "Nossir," Al said scratchily, "I don't have anything to volunteer that I know of, offhand."

He turned and left the wardroom, and he took with him a premonition of disaster and professional ruin. They'll put it in my record that I made wild, false charges against the ship's officers, he thought dully. I better wire Jo and tell her to stay where she is, because I've fouled it up good for us. I don't want her to marry a second-class cook on the Murmansk run.

In the mess deck they stared at his haggard, ashen features and asked questions, but he only shook his head mutely and went into the galley to get out the noon chow. He was busy

frying pork chops when the three officers and two yeomen from the D.O. went forward in the port passageway, leaving the ship. And he was frying the same pork chops when Yeoman Sam Goff came into the galley looking confounded.

"Pack your sea bag, Al," he said gloomily. "You can get your savings out of the office safe an' pick up your transfer papers."

Al shrugged ruefully. "They don't waste time, do they?"

"It *was* about the letter, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Al said. "That's what it was all about, Sam."

Goff frowned. "But I thought you had proof, Al. I thought . . ."

"I had a bomb," Al said, "that would have blown this ship all to hell, Yeoman Sam. Anyway, I was getting tired of this luxury liner, I need a change of scenery. Same old faces day after day."

He went below and started emptying his locker, and Doc came clattering down the ladder, his handsome face angry. "Al, they tricked us," he said. "They had me fooled good—I thought it was just a routine investigation into Pete Irvin's desertion."

"I knew better," Al said wearily. "They didn't fool me, baby."

Some of the others came while he packed, attempting to explain in angry bafflement how they'd been taken in by the inquiry, and Al kept grinning and saying, "I been wantin' a transfer a long time, I don't like these Boston winters. I'm glad to sign off this luxury craft, boys."

Ole Onionhead the head gunnion, they said. Goddam. Sure sorry you're leavin' us.

"Al, buddy, I'm puttin' in for a transfer," Doc snarled.

"You talk like a man with holes in his head," Al said gruffly.

HE WENT back to the ship's office and pushed the door open, and Higgins was waiting for him, vengeful and furious. "If you weren't departing in such haste," he grated, "I'd invite you onto the dock."

"Well, I'm not in any big hurry," Al bristled.

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"I oughta deck you right here and now," Higgins raged. "You pathetic incompetent useless excuse for an imitation cook!"

"That's enough!" said the skipper, coming through the door. "Lock the door, Goff," the skipper said, and Yeoman Sam, the only other man in the compartment, got up and clicked the lock. And the skipper stood there staring icily at Higgins with the Manila envelope in his hands. "There is some very enlightening material in this envelope, Mr. Higgins," he said.

"Captain, this man is a congenital liar!" Higgins snarled.

"Mr. Higgins, how much money is in the wardroom treasury?"

Higgins swallowed hard. "Around three hundred dollars, Captain."

"Turn it over immediately to the general mess fund."

Higgins deflated a little. "Captain, don't believe this man . . ."

"Mr. Higgins, you may go now," the skipper said very coldly.

Higgins nodded, tight-lipped, and started to leave. But as he passed Al he was seized again by the glassy-eyed rage. "You cheap punk, I've made it my business to personally censor your mail lately," he said viciously. "If marrying that bag is a shotgun necessity . . ."

That's when Al Woods made it his business to deck Higgins with a fast right to the sneer. He swung with a wild and wonderful sense of reckless abandonment, and it was enormously satisfying to watch Higgins bounce off a filing cabinet and sprawl ludicrously on the deck. If I don't get more than twenty years at hard labor for that, it's worth it, Al thought.

Higgins scrambled to his feet, clutching his bleeding nose, and squawled, "Striking an officer! You saw it, Captain! Now by God we'll see! Striking a commissioned officer! You're under arrest, Woods!"

"Stop shouting, Mr. Higgins," the skipper said disgustedly. "You fell down. I saw you fall down. Goff saw you fall down. Go to your cabin, Mr. Higgins, and clean up. Your nose seems to be bleeding."

Looking stunned and unbelieving, Higgins gaped at the C.O. for a long incredulous moment, and then went stalking indignantly from the office. Goff locked the door again, grinning.

"Noisy fellow," the skipper growled. "Now, Woods, I've checked this stuff you gave me. Cupper is going to pay for every article you have marked against him. Likewise Higgins, I ask you to believe that I have paid monthly for every canned ham, or whatever, I've taken ashore. If I'm not entirely honest, at least I'm too smart to take chances."

"I believe you, sir," Al said. "What about hitting Higgins?"

"You had an excusable grievance, Woods, but you should never have gone to a civilian gossip-peddler with it. As captain of this ship I'm responsible for the conduct of my officers. You should have laid your complaint before me. However, that's second-guessing now. Do you realize what would have happened if you'd spoken up back there a while ago? If you'd turned this envelope over to the Board of Inquiry?"

"I think so," Al said. Hitting Higgins was a major offense.

"Whatever your reasons, I appreciate the fact that when the chips were down, you elected to protect your ship from scandal, Woods. But I wonder if you understand what your silence may get you?"

Al shrugged. "I expected to get busted to second-class and shipped out, at least, sir," he said. What about Higgins? he thought.

"You won't be demoted, don't worry," the skipper growled. "But you're to report to the receiving station, and undoubtedly they will reassign you to a pretty rugged kind of duty, Woods. Now, I'm fully aware that you've made yourself the goat of this affair, but it isn't too late. Say the word and I will go with you to the District Office and explain this situation as I now understand it, Woods. I believe you're entitled to clear your name. You may have acted impulsively."

"Nossir," Al said stubbornly. "I thought it out, I knew what I was doin'." He shrugged. "After last Sunday—well, everybody's proud of this ship, sir. That goes for me especially, I

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guess. If it got around that some of the officers . . . well, I made my choice, sir."

The skipper nodded bleakly. "One thing I *can* do for you," he muttered. "You'll leave this ship with a 4.0 in conduct, Woods."

Good conduct means gold hash marks someday, Al thought wryly. Maybe I'll get a good conduct medal, even.

The skipper came around his desk and shook Al's hand. "Good luck, Woods," he said. "Next time, have faith in your C.O., eh?"

Al nodded, feeling a little overcome, and took his envelope of savings and his orders, and shook hands with glum Sam Goff. "I'm gonna miss this old bucket, Yeoman Sam," he said. "How about droppin' me a line sometimes, boy?" Yeoman Sam nodded. Sure, Al. Sure.

When Al got out to the well deck with his mattress roll and sea bag, a dozen shipmates waited there with angry, apologetic faces, and he shook hands all around, making facetious remarks and inane remarks, and then he was leaving the *Legume* forever. He was crossing the gangplank when Doc O'Neal yelled for him to wait. "You forgot your goddam typewriter, Hemingway," Doc said with a lame grin, bringing it to Al.

"Throw that dirty double-crosser over the side," Al said, but he accepted the cased Smith-Corona, and stood looking at Doc. "Well, maybe we'll bump into each other again somewhere, some time, barber."

"I told you, I'm puttin' in for a transfer," Doc said firmly. "You watch, boy. Goff will, too. An' plenty other guys."

"Don't be silly," Al said gruffly. "Well, *bon voyage*, podner."

A truck was waiting to take him to the receiving station, and he loaded his gear in the back and started to climb into the cab. And behind him he heard the bosun's pipe of M.A. Hawk, and heard the powerful Diesels rumble to life. He turned and watched, seeing the skipper appear on the bridge wing, feeling the skipper's stony eyes on him briefly, hearing the skipper's curt orders. "Cast off the bow lines!" The *Legume* began to ease away from the dock, and then the stern lines went snaking

aboard and the Diesels hummed and the great gray buoy tender was moving faster. Maybe I'll never see her again, Al thought, with a lump in his throat. Her starboard side was shoreward, and he looked up at the high flying bridge, seeing the tarp-covered twenty with its muzzle tilted skyward, threatening the gulls and the clouds. Al sighed a shuddering sigh, and saw the men on the deck waving, and waved, and saw the skipper still there on the bridge wing, small and erect, a man who had a duodenal ulcer and could have asked for easier duty ashore, or even a discharge; a man who had guts and pride and a bleak arctic dignity that hid the essential kindness inside.

"Let's go, mack," the truck driver said impatiently.

She was out into the greasy harbor now, disappearing behind other ships, but he could still see her rigging and the flying bridge and the covered twenties up there, gliding away. Old Hooligan bastridge, he thought sadly. He sighed. Well, here I go again.

AT THE receiving station Al handed his papers to a yeoman third. "Another SC for the GP," the yeoman said. What's GP? Al asked. "Greenland Pool," the yeoman said. Al's heart sank. Wait for me, Jo, he thought. I'll be back in a couple years, little darling. When does the Greenland Pool ship out? he asked, and the yeoman shrugged and said, "No tellin', mack. Couple weeks maybe, give or take a few days."

All transients at the receiving station, a hotel that had joined the Coast Guard for the duration, were divided into port and starboard watches. At morning muster the master-at-arms would bawl, "Port watch got the duty. Starboard watch fall in over that side." So Al would fall in with whichever group *didn't* have the duty. On the second morning the M.A. asked for volunteer blood donors, and Al stepped forward, not so much motivated by patriotism as by the M.A.'s statement the donors would have liberty after finishing at the Marine Hospital. He gave a pint of blood, got a free lunch (which wasn't

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fit for a Hooligan, he thought), rode back into Boston, and did some lonely drinking, which was good for his sore tonsils, and some lonely thinking that didn't lead much of anywhere.

I got to beat this Greenland rap, he kept thinking, or I won't be with Jo for a long time, boy. I got to figure me something.

He went to the Buddies Club and wrote her a long letter, explaining the situation, and urging her to drop everything and get on out to Boston, so they could at least get married and have a few days before he went off to live in an igloo. He sent it to her address in Tulsa, because he didn't know her home address.

He cultivated the yeoman at the receiving station. "Look, buddy," he said. "Can you find out any details about when and where this Greenland detail is gonna be goin'?" The yeoman said they had a big quota to fill, and everything was pretty indefinite.

Al kept volunteering as a blood donor, just to get out of the hotel. He'd go to the Marine Hospital with the rest and then tell the technician, who never seemed to remember him, that he'd had an operation two months before, and the technician would say well, you better not give any blood, then.

As the weather got colder, his tonsils were sorer oftener. A pharmacist's mate third at the station gave him some salt water to gargle. He kept worrying about why didn't Jo write. He kept ducking the cleanup details, and volunteering as a blood donor. There were so many transients milling around that nobody ever caught on, and he didn't care if they did. What could they do to him? Being shipped to Greenland was about the worst punishment he could think of, and he was already lined up for that long cold exile.

ON THE SIXTH morning Al went to the sick bay and said, "I got a sore throat, Chief." The CPM was always on duty at morning sick call, and he pried Al's mouth open with a

wooden spatula and peered with interest into his throat, and clucked disapprovingly.

"If you're slated for Greenland, you got to have them out, son," he said. "You're goin' to the Brighton Marine Hospital today."

Al knew the way, all right. He'd been there before.

At the hospital they looked, and clucked. "That's about as pretty a set of long-infected tonsils as I've ever laid eyes on," the doctor said. "That's going to be quite an undertaking, sailor."

On the second day they gave Al a needle and a pretty young nurse insisted he get into a wheelchair, although he felt like a fool, and she pushed him down the long corridor and around to a room, and the doctor put him in a chair like a dentist's chair, or barbershop chair, and used a little novocaine around the main area of trouble. And then he went in there and started to work. Immediately Al was spewing blood all over the doctor's clean white smock and his own hospital gown, very embarrassed and dismayed. The doctor's expression was grim and concerned, but he didn't quit until he was through in there, and he told the nurse to nevermind the wheelchair, get a cart, and they took Al back to his bed in the big ward flat on his back.

"Don't clear your throat," the nurse said sternly. "If you'd stop trying to clear your throat you wouldn't bleed so much. Every time it begins to coagulate in there, you tear it loose again."

"I'm sorry," Al strangled. And he tried not to clear his throat, but when it would feel as if he were about to choke to death, he just couldn't help himself, and he would clear his throat. And here she'd come again, the blood—and the impatient nurse, whose impatience turned into frowning worry.

Around ten o'clock that night they pushed his bed down the corridor and into the operating room, and the doctor sewed up the right tonsil, which was causing all the trouble. Around midnight he began hemorrhaging again, and the night nurse went scurrying, and pretty soon he was back in the operating

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room again, having the left tonsil stitched shut. "You're a contrary cuss," the sleepy doctor said. "You make a fountain out of a mole hill."

"I feel like a catfish," Al husked weakly. "Listen, I gave a pint of blood a few days ago, if it's important or anything."

"Oh, hell," the doctor said. They transfused him that night with plasma and a pint of whole blood, and the technician called him an Indian giver. He was pleasantly weak and blank of mind.

They fed him intravenously that night, and the friendly night nurse said he was one of her best patients because he wasn't always ringing his buzzer and wanting something. I just don't happen to want anything, except out of here, Al thought weakly.

Every morning he demanded his freedom. "I got to get back to the receiving station," he'd tell them urgently. "I'm expecting some important mail. It might be there already. I'm strong, let me out."

You're a physical wreck, they said. You're so weak you couldn't get a dime out of your pocket for carfare, chum. We've got to build you up a little before we turn you loose.

But on the sixth morning the nurse said, "If you eat every bit of your breakfast, the doctor says he'll parole you."

So Al forced the food down, and they brought him his clothes, and the doctor signed him out on a three-day convalescence leave. "You're an outpatient, check back with us once a day," the doctor said sternly.

Al headed for the receiving station, tense and worried. There must be a letter from Jo somewhere, dammit. The first person he saw when he entered the hotel was named Sam Goff, who stopped a cigarette halfway to his mouth and stared at Al in disbelief. "You must be a ghost," he protested. "You're supposed to be long gone for Greenland."

"What you doin' here, Yeoman Sam?" Al demanded.

"Me an' the ship's surgeon put in for transfers," Goff said. "Al, they said you shipped out in the Greenland Pool, buddy."

Al explained the situation, not fully grasping the fact that the Greenland Pool had departed without him. They can always ship me to Greenland as a one-man pool, he thought. He didn't know whether he approved of Doc and Sam resigning from the *Legume* or not. Right now, he wanted to find out if there was any mail from Oklahoma.

"Doc's in the sick bay," Goff said. "You wanta go see him, Al?"

"Later," Al said. "Look, Sammy, I'm anxious to see if I got any mail. Where do they keep the mail, buddy?"

Goff was checking mail back of the desk when the yeoman third sauntered out of the office and saw Al. He looked surprised. "Hey, *Legume*, I thought you went north like a high-flyin' goose," he said. "You s'pose to be Greenland bound, boy."

Al explained about his operation, without going into detail, and the yeoman looked rueful and said, "There was a girl come in while I had the duty lookin' for you, pal. I told her you had shipped out with the Greenland Pool. You better call her."

Al's heart was thumping like a bass drum. "What she look like?"

The yeoman shrugged. "Small, like. Black hair. Good-lookin'."

Jo! Al thought wildly, and Sam was handing him a letter, and it was from Jo. He ripped it open with shaking hands and read it. "I'll arrive at three-ten, October first," she wrote. "That's a Thursday. If you can't get off to meet me, Alvin dear, I will go to the Copley Plaza and register as Miss Josephine Hill, temporarily." There was more, but Al's stunned brain refused to register it. This was Monday, October fifth. And Jo thought he had gone to Greenland.

He left the receiving station at a run and wildly flagged down a passing cab. But there was no use hurrying. When he got to the Copley Plaza he learned that Jo had checked out Saturday, the third. Day before yesterday. She's gone back to Oklahoma,

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Al thought with anguish. He went to South Station and asked all sorts of questions, but they were unable to help him. They didn't remember any particular small girl with crow-black hair and gray eyes and a wistful smile.

Al took a fast cab back to the receiving station and hunted up Yeoman Sam. "I got to have some emergency leave," he panted. "She must of gone back to Tulsa, Sam. She thinks I'm headed for the North Pole." Sympathetic Sam took him to see the chief yeoman, a warm personal friend of Goff's, it seemed, and the chief patiently got all the details and said judicially, "Right now you're on convalescence leave, Woods. You got to check back to the hospital once a day, it says on your pass. But Thursday morning, if you're cleared by the hospital, we'll fix you up with thirteen days' regular leave. You got a lot of accumulated leave time on your record. Thursday come see me. Right?"

Doc and Sam finagled liberty that afternoon and the three of them sat in a dim bar drinking moderately and listening to the juke box play songs that tore Al's heart into confetti, and Doc, trying to cheer up the poor old cook, said, "Hey, Alvin-head, did Sammy tell you what he's got cookin' for us three musket-eaters, buddy?"

Al shook his head, sighing despondently.

"Him an' the chief yeoman are ole friends," Doc said. "Sam's fixin' it up for us to get assigned to a crew together. They're gonna start poolin' for sub-chaser school in Miami. That's in Florida, in case you never heard of it. Land of eternal sunshine," Doc enthused, "an' citrus fruities an' flowers. The poop is them sub-killers carry one surgeon, one stenographer, an' one short-order cook. That'll be us, baby."

"Boy," Al said listlessly. "That's great."

He slept at the hospital that night so he could check in with the doctor in the morning and have done with it for the day, and then he rode the streetcar and subway into Boston and wandered around like a lost soul. It was a sunny, crisp, poig-

nant autumn day, and October was when he had first started falling helplessly in love with Jo; he was consumed by a bitter-sweet nostalgia for Oklahoma in October.

He sat on a bench by a pool, chewing Aspirgum and brooding at the mirrored loveliness of sky and trees. Jo would have loved it here, he thought. She always loved October best of all.

A scatter of people strolled along the paths and he looked at them fiercely, envying the couples and feeling compassion for the lone ones, knowing how it was to be desperately alone. Like that girl coming through the trees, wearing a yellow polo coat, hands jammed into the pockets, her dark head bent, kicking at the leaves.

Suddenly there was something throat-clutchingly familiar about that girl, the polo coat, that dark head, that leaf-kicking routine. Al got unsteadily to his feet, staring with his heart in his eyes as she came on along the path.

She lifted her head to look at the sky and her face was sad, pensive, wistful, and terribly vulnerable. Al choked and started toward her like a sleepwalker, and she saw him and stopped, the stunned disbelief clear on her sweet face, a hand going to her throat. And then they were running, arms reaching out.

She was warm and real, weeping in his arms, kissing him. "Jo," he said huskily. "Jo, baby. I thought you'd gone back home."

He'd never seen her cry before. She cried beautifully, her arms clinging desperately around his neck, crying and covering his face with tearful kisses. "They sssaid you'd bbbeen sssent . . . They sssaid you'd gggone to Greenland! I didn't know what to do," she sobbed. "I didn't want to go back—this was closer to Greenland than Tulsa. I thought maybe they'd need civilian government employees there, and maybe I could go too . . ."

"Hush, honey, don't talk about it," Al said. "Nobody is goin' to Greenland. We're goin' to Florida, baby. You wanta go to Florida?"

"Oh, Alvin," she said, leaning back in his arms and giving

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him a tremulous, damp, lopsided smile. "Anywhere, just so *you're* there."

That's all he wanted to know or would ever want to know or need to know. Thanks, he said a little self-consciously in his mind. Thanks for everything—especially the tonsils. I don't know why I go on worrying about everything when everything always turns out O.K. in the end. From now on I'm through worrying, boy. I got it made.

My Family and Other Animals

GERALD DURRELL



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

GERALD DURRELL was born in Janshedpur, India in 1925. He was educated on the continent, in France, Italy, Switzerland and Greece. As is immediately apparent to anyone who has read one of his books—among them "The Bafut Beagles" and "Three Tickets to Adventure"—his special interest has always been zoology. And in this connection Mr. Durrell has made four major collecting trips to West Africa and South America. Between expeditions, he maintains a busy schedule of writing, lecturing and broadcasting for the B.B.C.

MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS

—Gerald Durrell

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THE SPEECH FOR THE DEFENSE

This is the story of a five-year sojourn that I and my family made on the Greek island of Corfu. I have attempted to draw an accurate and unexaggerated picture, but to explain some of my family's more curious ways, however, I feel that I should state that at the time we were in Corfu the family were all quite young: Larry, the eldest, was twenty-three; Leslie was nineteen; Margo eighteen; while I was the youngest, being of the tender and impressionable age of ten. We have never been very certain of my mother's age, for the simple reason that she can never remember her date of birth; all I can say is that she was old enough to have four children. My mother also insists that I explain that she is a widow for, as she so penetratingly observed, you never know what people might think.

I should like to pay a special tribute to my mother, to whom this book is dedicated. Like a gentle, enthusiastic, and understanding Noah, she has steered her vessel full of strange progeny through the stormy seas of life with great skill, always faced with the possibility of mutiny, always surrounded by the dangerous shoals of overdraft and extravagance, never being sure that her navigation would be approved by the crew, but certain that she would be blamed for anything that went wrong. That she survived the voyage is a miracle, but survive it she did, and, moreover, with her reason more or less intact. As my brother Larry rightly points out, we can be proud of the way we have brought her up; she is a credit to us. That she has reached that happy Nirvana where nothing shocks or startles is exemplified by the fact that one weekend recently, when all alone in the house, she was treated to the sudden arrival of a series of crates containing two pelicans, a scarlet ibis, a vulture, and eight monkeys. A lesser mortal might have quailed at such a contingency, but

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not Mother. On Monday morning I found her in the garage being pursued round and round by an irate pelican which she was trying to feed with sardines from a tin.

"I'm glad you've come, dear," she panted; "this pelican is a little difficult to handle."

When I asked her how she *knew* the animals belonged to me, she replied, "Well, of course I knew they were yours, dear; who else would send pelicans to me?"



THE MIGRATION

July had been blown out like a candle by a biting wind that ushered in a leaden August sky. A sharp, stinging drizzle fell, billowing into opaque grey sheets when the wind caught it. Along the Bournemouth sea-front the beach huts turned blank wooden faces towards a greeny-grey, froth-chained sea that leaped eagerly at the cement bulwark of the shore.

Considered as a group my family was not a very prepossessing sight that afternoon, for the weather had brought with it the usual selection of ills to which we were prone. For me, lying on the floor, labelling my collection of shells, it had brought catarrh. For my brother Leslie, hunched dark and glowering by the fire, it had inflamed the convolutions of his ears. To my sister Margo it had delivered a fresh dappling of acne spots to a face that was already blotched like a red veil. For my mother, who was engrossed in a large volume entitled *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*, there was a rich, bubbling cold, and a twinge of rheumatism to season it. Only my eldest brother, Larry, was untouched, but it was sufficient that he was irritated by our failings.

It was Larry, of course, who started it. Larry was designed by Providence to go through life like a small, blond firework, exploding ideas in other people's minds, and then curling up

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with catlike unctuousness and refusing to take any blame for the consequences. He had become increasingly irritable as the afternoon wore on. At length, he decided to attack Mother, as being the obvious cause of the trouble.

"Why do we stand this bloody climate?" he asked suddenly, making a gesture towards the rain-distorted window. "Look at it! And, if it comes to that, look at us. . . . Margo swollen up like a plate of scarlet porridge . . . Leslie wandering around with fourteen fathoms of cotton wool in each ear . . . Gerry sounds as though he's had a cleft palate from birth. . . . What we need is sunshine. Really, it's time something was done. I can't be expected to produce deathless prose in an atmosphere of gloom and eucalyptus."

"Yes, dear," said Mother vaguely.

"What we all need," said Larry, "is sunshine . . . a country where we can *grow*."

"Yes, dear, that would be nice," agreed Mother, not really listening.

"I had a letter from George this morning—he says Corfu's wonderful. Why don't we pack up and go to Greece?"

"Very well, dear, if you like," said Mother unguardedly.

"When?" asked Larry, rather surprised at this cooperation.

Mother, perceiving that she had made a tactical error, cautiously lowered *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*.

"Well, I think it would be a sensible idea if you were to go on ahead, dear, and arrange things. Then you can write and tell me if it's nice, and we all can follow," she said cleverly.

Larry gave her a withering look. "You said *that* when I suggested going to Spain," he reminded her, "and I sat for two interminable months in Seville, waiting for you to come out, while you did nothing except write me massive letters about drains and drinking water, as though I was the town clerk or something. No, if we're going to Greece, let's all go together."

"You do *exaggerate*, Larry," said Mother plaintively; "anyway, I can't go just like that. I have to arrange something about this house."

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"Arrange? Arrange what, for heaven's sake? Sell it."

"Don't be ridiculous, dear," said Mother firmly; "that's quite out of the question. It would be madness."

So we sold the house and fled from the gloom of the English summer, like a flock of migrating swallows.

We all travelled light, taking with us only what we considered to be the bare essentials of life. When we opened our luggage for customs inspection, the contents of our bags were a fair indication of character and interests. Thus Margo's luggage contained a multitude of diaphanous garments, three books on slimming, and a regiment of small bottles, each containing some elixir guaranteed to cure acne. Leslie's case held a couple of roll-top pullovers and a pair of trousers which were wrapped round two revolvers, an air-pistol, a book called *Be Your Own Gunsmith*, and a large bottle of oil that leaked. Larry was accompanied by two trunks of books and a briefcase containing his clothes. Mother's luggage was sensibly divided between clothes and various volumes on cooking and gardening. I travelled with only those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, my dog, Roger, and a jam jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids. Thus, by our standards fully equipped, we left the clammy shores of England.

France rain-washed and sorrowful, Switzerland like a Christmas cake, Italy exuberant, noisy, and smelly, were passed, leaving only confused memories. The tiny ship throbbed away from the heel of Italy out into the twilit sea, and as we slept in our stuffy cabins, somewhere in that tract of moon-polished water we passed the invisible dividing line and entered the bright, looking-glass world of Greece. Slowly this sense of change seeped down to us, and so, at dawn, we awoke restless and went on deck.

The sea lifted smooth blue muscles of wave as it stirred in the dawn light. The sky was pale and stained with yellow on the eastern horizon. Ahead lay the island of Corfu, the mountains stained with the green of olive groves. Along the shore curved

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beaches as white as tusks among tottering cities of brilliant gold, red, and white rocks. We rounded the northern cape, a smooth shoulder of rust-red cliff carved into a series of giant caves, and the island sloped gently down, blurred with the silver and green iridescence of olives, with here and there an admonishing finger of black cypress against the sky. The shallow sea in the bays was butterfly blue, and even above the sound of the ship's engines we could hear, faintly ringing from the shore like a chorus of tiny voices, the shrill, triumphant cries of the cicadas.



THE UNSUSPECTED ISLE

We threaded our way out of the noise and confusion of the customs shed into the brilliant sunshine on the quay. Around us the town rose steeply, tiers of multi-colored houses piled haphazardly, green shutters folded back from their windows like the wings of a thousand moths.

Larry walked swiftly, with an expression of such regal disdain on his face that one did not notice his diminutive size, keeping a wary eye on the porters who struggled with his trunks. Behind him strolled Leslie, short, stocky, with an air of quiet belligerence, and then Margo, trailing yards of muslin and scent. Mother, looking like a tiny, harassed missionary in an uprising, was dragged unwillingly to the nearest lamp post by an exuberant Roger and forced to stand there, staring into space, while he relieved the pent-up feelings that had accumulated in his kennel. Larry chose two magnificently dilapidated horse-drawn cabs, had the luggage installed in one and seated himself in the second. Then he looked round irritably.

"Well?" he asked. "What are we waiting for?"

At this moment Mother arrived, slightly dishevelled, and we

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had to turn our attentions to the task of getting Roger into the cab. He had never been in such a vehicle, and treated it with suspicion. Eventually we had to lift him bodily and hurl him inside, yelping frantically, and then pile in breathlessly after him and hold him down. The horse, frightened by this activity, broke into a shambling trot, and we ended in a tangled heap on the floor of the cab with Roger moaning loudly underneath us.

"What an entry," said Larry bitterly. "I had hoped to give an impression of gracious majesty, and this is what happens . . . we arrive in town like a troupe of mediæval tumblers."

"Don't keep on, dear," Mother said soothingly, straightening her hat; "we'll soon be at the hotel."

So our cab clopped and jingled its way into the town, while we sat on the horsehair seats and tried to muster the appearance of gracious majesty Larry required. Roger, wrapped in Leslie's powerful grasp, lolled his head over the side of the vehicle and rolled his eyes as though at his last gasp. Then we rattled past an alley-way in which four scruffy mongrels were lying in the sun. Roger stiffened, glared at them, and let forth a torrent of deep barks. The mongrels were immediately galvanized into activity, and they sped after the cab, yapping vociferously. Our pose was irretrievably shattered, for it took two people to restrain the raving Roger, while the rest of us leaned out of the cab and made wild gestures at the pursuing horde. This only had the effect of exciting them still further, and at each alley-way we passed their numbers increased, until by the time we were rolling down the main thoroughfare of the town there were some twenty-four dogs swirling about our wheels, almost hysterical with anger.

"Why doesn't somebody *do* something?" asked Larry, raising his voice above the uproar. "This is like a scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

"Why don't *you* do something; instead of criticizing?" snapped Leslie, who was locked in combat with Roger.

Larry promptly rose to his feet, snatched the whip from our astonished driver's hand, made a wild swipe at the herd of dogs, and knocked off Mother's hat.

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"Do be careful, dear," said Mother, clutching her hat; "you might hurt someone. I should put the whip down."

At that moment the cab shambled to a halt outside a doorway over which hung a board with "Pension Suisse" inscribed on it. The dogs, feeling that they were at last going to get to grips with this effeminate black canine who rode in cabs, surrounded us in a solid, panting wedge. The door of the hotel opened and an ancient bewhiskered porter appeared and stood staring glassily at the turmoil in the street. The difficulties of getting Roger out of the cab and into the hotel were considerable, for he was a heavy dog and it took the combined efforts of the family to lift, carry, and restrain him. We staggered into the hall, and the porter slammed the front door and leaned against it, his moustache quivering.

It was unfortunate for Mother's peace of mind that the Pension Suisse happened to be situated in the road leading to the local cemetery. After lunch, as we sat on our small balcony overhanging the street an apparently endless succession of funerals passed beneath us. Cabs decorated with yards of purple and black crêpe were drawn by horses so enveloped in plumes and canopies that it was a wonder they could move. Six or seven of these cabs, containing the mourners in full and uninhibited grief, preceded the corpse itself. This came on another cartlike vehicle, and was ensconced in a coffin so large and lush that it looked more like an enormous birthday cake.

As each funeral passed, Mother became more and more agitated.

"I'm sure it's an epidemic," she exclaimed at last, peering down nervously into the street.

"Nonsense, Mother; don't fuss," said Larry airily.

"But, dear, so *many* of them . . . it's unnatural."

"There's nothing unnatural about dying. People do it all the time."

"Yes, but they don't die like flies unless there's something wrong."

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"Perhaps they save 'em up and bury 'em in a bunch," suggested Leslie callously.

"Don't be silly," said Mother. "I'm sure it's something to do with the drains. It can't be healthy for people to have *those* sort of arrangements. Anyway, I think we ought to find out. Can't you ring up the health authorities, Larry?"

"There probably aren't any health authorities here," Larry pointed out, "and even if there were, I doubt if they'd tell me."

"Well," Mother said with determination, "there's nothing for it. We'll have to move. We must get out of the town. We must find a house in the country *at once*."

The next morning we started on our house-hunt, accompanied by Mr. Beeler, the hotel guide. We drove around the island in a cloud of dust while Mr. Beeler showed us villa after villa in a bewildering selection of sizes, colors, and situations, and Mother shook her head firmly at them all.

"Madame Durrell," Mr. Beeler said at last, "I have shown you every villa I know, yet you do not want any. Madame, what is it you require? What is the matter with these villas?"

Mother regarded him with astonishment. "Didn't you *notice*?" she asked. "None of them had a bathroom."

Mr. Beeler stared at Mother with bulging eyes. "But Madame," he wailed in genuine anguish, "what for you want a bathroom? Have you not got the sea?"

We returned in silence to the hotel.

By the following morning Mother had decided that we would hire a car and go out house-hunting on our own. She was convinced that somewhere on the island there lurked a villa with a bathroom. We did not share Mother's belief, and so it was a slightly irritable group that she herded down to the taxi rank in the main square. The taxi drivers, perceiving our innocent appearance, scrambled from inside their cars and flocked round us like vultures, each trying to out-shout his compatriots. Their voices grew louder and louder, their eyes flashed, they clutched each other's arms and ground their teeth at one another.

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"Can't you *do* something, Larry?" Mother squeaked.

"Tell them you'll report them to the British consul," suggested Larry, raising his voice above the noise.

"Don't be silly, dear," said Mother breathlessly. "Just explain that we don't understand."

Margo, simpering, stepped into the breach. "We English," she yelled at the gesticulating drivers; "we no understand Greek."

Suddenly everyone was startled into silence by a deep voice that rumbled out above the uproar.

"Hoy!" roared the voice. "Whys donts yous have someones who can talks your own language?"

Turning, we saw an ancient Dodge parked by the curb, and behind the wheel sat a short, barrel-bodied individual, with hamlike hands and a great, leathery, scowling face surmounted by a jauntily tilted peaked cap. He opened the door of the car, surged out onto the pavement, and waddled across to us. Then he stopped, scowling even more ferociously, and surveyed the group of silent cab drivers.

"Thems been worrying yous?" he asked us. "Excuses me a minute and I'll fix them."

He turned on the drivers a blast of Greek that almost swept them off their feet. Aggrieved, gesticulating, angry, they were herded back to their cars by this extraordinary man. Having given them a final and, it appeared, derogatory blast of Greek, he turned to us again.

"Wheres yous wants to gos?" he asked, almost truculently.

"We are looking," said Mother firmly, "for a villa with a bathroom. Do you know of one?"

"Sure, I'll takes yous. Gets into the cars."

We climbed into the spacious car, and shot through the twisted streets to the outskirts of the town, swerving in and out among the loaded donkeys, the carts, the groups of peasant women, and innumerable dogs, our horn honking a deafening warning. During this our driver seized the opportunity to engage us in conversation.

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"Yous English? Thought so. . . . English always wants bathrooms. . . . I gets a bathroom in my house. . . . Spiro's my name, Spiro Hakiaopoulos . . . they alls calls me Spiro Americano on accounts of I lives in America. . . . Yes, spent eight years in Chicago. . . . That's where I learnt my goods English. . . ."

We sped down a white road covered in a thick layer of silky dust that rose in a boiling cloud behind us. We passed vineyards where the tiny vines were laced in green leaves, olive groves where the pitted trunks made a hundred astonished faces at us, and great clumps of zebra-striped cane that fluttered their leaves like a multitude of green flags. At last we roared to the top of a hill, and Spiro crammed on his brakes and brought the car to a dust-misted halt.

"Theres you ares," he said, pointing with a great stubby forefinger; "thats the villa with the bathrooms, likes yous wanted."

Mother, who had kept her eyes firmly shut throughout the drive, now opened them cautiously and looked. Spiro was pointing at a gentle curve of hillside that rose from the glittering sea. The hill and the valleys around it were an eiderdown of olive groves that shone with a fishlike gleam where the breeze touched the leaves. Halfway up the slope, guarded by a group of tall, slim cypress trees, nestled a small strawberry-pink villa, like some exotic fruit lying in the greenery.



THE STRAWBERRY-PINK VILLA

The villa was small and square, standing in its tiny garden with an air of pink-faced determination. The garden, surrounded by tall fuchsia hedges, had flower beds worked in complicated geometrical patterns, marked with smooth white stones. The bougainvillæ that sprawled luxuriously over the tiny front balcony was hung, as though for a carnival, with its lantern-shaped magenta flowers. The warm air was thick with the scent of a

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hundred dying flowers, and full of the gentle, soothing whisper and murmur of insects. As soon as we saw it, we wanted to live there; it was as though the villa had been standing there waiting for our arrival.

Having lumbered so unexpectedly into our lives, Spiro now took over complete control of our affairs. It was better, he explained, for him to do things, as everyone knew him, and he would make sure we were not swindled.

Once Spiro had taken charge he stuck to us like a burr. Within a week he was our guide, philosopher, and friend. He became so much a member of the family that very soon there was scarcely a thing we did, or planned to do, in which he was not involved in some way. He was always there, bull-voiced and scowling, arranging things we wanted done, telling us how much to pay for things, keeping a watchful eye on us all and reporting to Mother anything he thought she should know.

So we were installed in the villa, and we each settled down and adapted ourselves to our surroundings in our respective ways. Margo, merely by donning a microscopic swim suit and sun-bathing in the olive groves, had collected an ardent band of handsome peasant youths who appeared like magic from an apparently deserted landscape. Mother felt forced to point out that she thought this sun-bathing was rather *unwise*.

"After all, dear, that costume doesn't cover an awful lot, does it?" she pointed out.

"Oh, Mother, don't be so old-fashioned," Margo said impatiently. "After all, you only die once."

This remark was as baffling as it was true, and successfully silenced Mother.

It had taken three husky peasant boys half an hour's sweating and panting to get Larry's trunks into the villa. Once they were installed, Larry spent a happy day unpacking them, and the room was so full of books that it was almost impossible to get in or out. Having constructed battlements of books round the outer perimeter, Larry would spend the whole day in there with his typewriter, only emerging dreamily for meals.

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Leslie meanwhile had unpacked his revolvers and startled us all with an apparently endless series of explosions while he fired at an old tin can from his bedroom window. After a particularly deafening morning, Larry erupted from his room and said he could not be expected to work if the villa was going to be rocked to its foundations every five minutes. Mother, whose nerves had also been somewhat frayed by the reports, suggested that Leslie practise with an empty revolver. Leslie spent half an hour explaining why this was impossible. At length he reluctantly took his tin farther away from the house where the noise was slightly muffled but just as unexpected.

In between keeping a watchful eye on us all, Mother was settling down in her own way. The house was redolent with the scent of herbs and the sharp tang of garlic and onions, and the kitchen was full of a bubbling selection of pots, among which she moved, spectacles askew, muttering to herself. When she could drag herself away from the kitchen, she would drift happily about the garden, enthusiastically weeding and planting.

For myself, the garden held sufficient interest; it was a magic land, a forest of flowers through which roamed creatures I had never seen before. Among the thick, silky petals of each rose bloom lived tiny, crablike spiders that scuttled sideways when disturbed. Their small, translucent bodies were coloured to match the flowers they inhabited: pink, ivory, wine red, or buttery yellow. On the rose stems, encrusted with green flies, ladybirds moved like newly painted toys. Carpenter bees, like furry, electric-blue bears, zigzagged among the flowers, growling fatly and busily. Hummingbird hawk-moths, sleek and neat, whipped up and down the paths with a fussy efficiency, pausing occasionally on speed-misty wings to lower a long, slender proboscis into a bloom. Among the white cobbles large black ants staggered and gesticulated in groups round strange trophies: a dead caterpillar, a piece of rose petal or a dried grass-head fat with seeds.

At first I was so bewildered by this profusion of life on our

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very doorstep that I could only move about the garden in a daze, watching now this creature, now that, constantly having my attention distracted by the flights of brilliant butterflies that drifted over the hedge. Gradually, as I became more used to the bustle of insect life among the flowers, I found I could concentrate more. I would spend hours squatting on my heels or lying on my stomach watching the private lives of the creatures around me, while Roger sat nearby, a look of resignation on his face.

I came to know the plump peasant girls who passed the garden every morning and evening. Riding side-saddle on their slouching, drooping-eared donkeys, they were shrill and colourful as parrots. As the days passed, I came gradually to understand them. What had at first been a confused babble became a series of recognizable separate sounds. Then, suddenly, these took on meaning, and slowly and haltingly I started to use words and strung them into ungrammatical and stumbling sentences. Our neighbours were delighted, as though I had conferred some delicate compliment by trying to learn their language. They would lean over the hedge, their faces screwed up with concentration, as I groped my way through a greeting or a simple remark, and when I had successfully concluded they would beam at me, nodding and smiling, and clap their hands. By degrees I learned their names, who was related to whom, which were married and which hoped to be, and other details. I learned where their little cottages were among the olive groves, and should Roger and I chance to pass that way the entire family would tumble out to greet us, to bring a chair, so that I might sit under their vine and eat some fruit with them.

Gradually the magic of the island settled over us as gently and clingingly as pollen. Each day had a tranquillity, a timelessness, about it, so that you wished it would never end. But then the dark skin of night would peel off and there would be a fresh day waiting for us, glossy and colourful as a child's transfer and with the same tinge of unreality.



A BUSHEL OF LEARNING

Scarcely had we settled into the strawberry-pink villa before Mother decided that I was running wild, and that it was necessary for me to have some sort of education. But where to find this on a remote Greek island? As usual when a problem arose the entire family flung itself with enthusiasm into the task of solving it. Sitting under the open window in the twilight, with my arm round Roger's shaggy neck, I listened with interest, not unmixed with indignation, to the family discussion on my fate.

"Plenty of time for him to learn," said Leslie; "after all, he can read, can't he? I can teach him to shoot and to sail."

"But, dear, that wouldn't *really* be much use to him later on," Mother pointed out, adding vaguely, "unless he was going into the Merchant Navy or something."

"I think it's essential that he learns to dance," said Margo, "or else he'll grow up into one of these awful tongue-tied hobble-dehoyos."

"Yes, dear; but that sort of thing can come *later*. He should be getting some sort of grounding in things like mathematics and French . . . and his spelling's appalling."

"Literature," said Larry, with conviction, "that's what he wants, a good solid grounding in literature. The rest will follow naturally."

"Yes, dear, but what we want is someone who can teach Gerry and who'll encourage him in his interests."

"He appears to have only one interest," said Larry bitterly, "and that's this awful urge to fill things with animal life. I don't think he ought to be encouraged in *that*. Life is fraught with danger as it is. I went to light a cigarette only this morning and a damn' great bumble-bee flew out of the box."

"He doesn't mean any harm, poor little chap," said Mother; "he's so interested in all these things."

"I wouldn't mind being attacked by bumble-bees, if it *led*

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anywhere," Larry pointed out. "But it's just a phase . . . he'll grow out of it by the time he's fourteen."

"He's been in this phase from the age of two," said Mother, "and he's showing no signs of growing out of it."

"Well, if you insist on stuffing him full of useless information, I suppose George would have a shot at teaching him," said Larry.

"That's a brain-wave," said Mother delightedly. "Will you go over and see him? I think the sooner he starts the better."

I discovered that George was an old friend of Larry's, who had come to Corfu to write. There was nothing very unusual about this, for all Larry's acquaintances in those days were either authors, poets, or painters. It was George, moreover, who was really responsible for our presence in Corfu, for he had written such eulogistic letters about the place that Larry had become convinced we could live nowhere else. Now George was to pay the penalty for his rashness. He came over to the villa to discuss my education with Mother, and we were introduced. George was a very tall and extremely thin man. His lean, skull-like face was partially concealed by a finely pointed brown beard and a pair of large tortoise-shell spectacles.

Gravely George set about the task of teaching me. He was undeterred by the fact that there were no school-books available on the island; he simply ransacked his own library and appeared on the appointed day armed with a most unorthodox selection of tomes. Sombrely and patiently he taught me the rudiments of geography from the maps in the back of an ancient copy of *Pears Cyclopædia*, English from books that ranged from Wilde to Gibbon, French from *Le Petit Larousse*, and mathematics from memory. From my point of view, however, the most important thing was that we devoted some of our time to natural history, and George meticulously and carefully taught me how to observe and how to note down observations in a diary. At once my enthusiastic but haphazard interest in nature became focused, for I found that by writing things down I could learn and remember much more. The only mornings that I was

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ever on time for my lessons were those which were given up to natural history.

Our attempts at other subjects were not, at first, conspicuously successful, until George discovered that by seasoning a series of unpalatable facts with a sprig of zoology and a sprinkle of completely irrelevant detail, he could get me interested. Thus I became conversant with some historical data which, to the best of my knowledge, have never been recorded before. Breathlessly, I followed Hannibal's progress over the Alps. His reason for attempting such a feat and what he intended to do on the other side were details that scarcely worried me. No, my interest in what I considered to be a very badly planned expedition lay in the fact that *I knew the name of each and every elephant*. I also knew that Hannibal had appointed a special man not only to feed and look after the elephants, *but to give them hot-water bottles when the weather got cold*. This interesting fact seems to have escaped most serious historians. Another thing that most history books never seem to mention is that Columbus's first words on setting foot ashore in America were, "Great heavens, look . . . a jaguar!" With such an introduction, how could one fail to take an interest in the continent's subsequent history? So George, hampered by inadequate books and a reluctant pupil, would strive to make his teaching interesting, so that the lessons did not drag.



A TREASURE OF SPIDERS

One hot, dreamy afternoon, when everything except the shouting cicadas seemed to be asleep, Roger and I sat by a mossy bank, sharing a bunch of grapes. Roger ate his whole, pips and all. I spat out my pips into a circle around me, and imagined with satisfaction the flourishing vineyard that would grow up

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on the spot. When the grapes were finished I rolled over onto my stomach and examined the bank behind me.

A tiny green grasshopper with a long, melancholy face sat twitching his hind legs nervously. A fragile snail sat on a moss sprig, meditating and waiting for the evening dew. A plump scarlet mite, the size of a match-head, struggled like a tubby huntsman through the forest of moss. It was a microscopic world, full of fascinating life. As I watched the mite making his slow progress I noticed a curious thing. Here and there on the green plush surface of the moss were scattered faint circular marks, each the size of a shilling. I wondered idly what could have made them. They were too irregular, too scattered to be the prints of some beast, and what was it that would walk up an almost vertical bank in such a haphazard manner? Besides, they were not like imprints. I prodded the edge of one of these circles with a piece of grass, and suddenly my stomach gave a clutch of tremendous excitement. It was as though my grass-stalk had found a hidden spring, for the whole circle lifted up like a trapdoor. As I stared, I saw to my amazement that it was in fact a trapdoor, lined with silk, and with a neatly bevelled edge that fitted snugly into the mouth of the silk-lined shaft it concealed. The edge of the door was fastened to the lip of the tunnel by a small flap of silk that acted as a hinge. Peering down the silken tunnel, I could see nothing; I poked my grass-stalk down, but there was no response. For a long time I sat staring at this fantastic home, trying to decide what sort of beast had made it. I felt that I must get to the bottom of this problem immediately. I would go down and ask George if he knew what this mysterious beast was. Calling Roger, who was busily trying to uproot an olive tree, I set off at a brisk trot.

I arrived at George's villa bursting with excitement, gave a perfunctory knock at the door, and dashed in. Only then did I realize he had company. Seated in a chair near him was a figure which, at first glance, I decided must be George's brother, for he also wore a beard. He was, however, in contrast to George,

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immaculately dressed in a grey flannel suit with waistcoat, a spotless white shirt, a tasteful but sombre tie, and large, solid, highly polished boots. I paused on the threshold, embarrassed, while George surveyed me sardonically.

"Good evening," he greeted me. "From the joyful speed of your entry I take it that you have not come for a little extra tuition."

I apologized for the intrusion, and then told George about the curious nest I had found.

"Thank heavens you're here, Theodore," he said to his bearded companion. "I shall now be able to hand the problem over to expert hands."

"Hardly an expert . . ." mumbled the man called Theodore.

"Gerry, this is Doctor Theodore Stephanides," said George. "He is an expert on practically everything you care to mention. And what you don't mention, he does. He, like you, is an eccentric nature-lover. Theodore, this is Gerry Durrell."

"Very pleased to meet you," he said, apparently addressing his beard, and gave me a quick, shy glance from twinkling blue eyes.

I shook his hand and said I was very pleased to meet him, too.

"Well, Theodore," George said, "and what d'you think produced these strange secret passages?"

"Well . . . er . . ." he said, his words coming slowly and meticulously, "it sounds to me as though they might be the burrows of the trapdoor spider . . . er . . . it is a species which is quite common here in Corfu . . . that is to say, when I say common, I suppose I have found some thirty or . . . er . . . forty specimens during the time I have been here."

"Ah," said George, "trapdoor spiders, eh?"

"Yes," said Theodore. "I feel that it's more than probable that that is what they are. However, I may be mistaken. Perhaps, if they are not too far away, we could go and verify it," he suggested to me tentatively. "I mean to say, if you have nothing better to do, and it's not too far . . ." His voice trailed away on a faintly interrogative note.

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I said that they were only just up the hill, not really far.

He picked up a neat grey Homburg and placed it squarely on his head. He held out his hand and shook George's briefly.

"Thank you for a delightful tea," he said, and stumped gravely off along the path by my side.

As we walked along I studied him covertly. He had a straight, well-shaped nose; a humorous mouth lurking in the ash-blond beard; straight, rather bushy eyebrows under which his eyes, keen but with a twinkle in them and laughter-wrinkles at the corners, surveyed the world. He strode along energetically, humming to himself.

At length we came to the gloomy olive grove, and I led Theodore to the bank and pointed out the mysterious trapdoor.

He peered down at it, his eyes narrowed.

"Ah-ha," he said, "yes . . . um . . ." He produced from his waistcoat pocket a tiny penknife, opened it, inserted the point of the blade delicately under the little door, and flipped it back.

"Yes, they are the burrows of the trapdoor spiders," he said, "but this one does not appear to be inhabited. Generally, the creature will hold on to the . . . er . . . *trapdoor* . . . with her legs, or rather, her *claws*, and she holds on with such tenacity that you have to be careful or you will damage the door, trying to force it open. Um . . . yes . . . these are the burrows of the females, of course. The male makes a similar burrow, but it is only about half the size."

I remarked that it was the most curious structure I had seen.

"Ah-ha! yes," said Theodore, "they are certainly very curious. A thing that always puzzles me is how the female knows when the male is approaching."

I must have looked blank, for he shot me a quick look and went on:

"The spider, of course, waits inside its burrow until some insect—a fly or a grasshopper, or something similar—chances to walk past. They can judge, it seems, whether the insect is close enough to be caught. If it is, the spider . . . er . . . pops out of its hole and catches the creature. Now when the male comes in

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search of the female he must walk over the moss to the trap-door, and I have often wondered why it is that he is not . . . er . . . devoured by the female in mistake. It is possible, of course, that his footsteps sound different. Or he may make some sort of . . . you know . . . some sort of *sound* which the female recognizes."

We walked down the hill in silence. When we reached the place where the paths forked I said that I must leave him.

"Ah, well, I'll say good-bye," he said. He held out his hand and shook mine gravely. "I . . . er . . . I expect we shall meet again."

He turned and stumped off down the hill, swinging his stick, staring about him with observant eyes. I watched him out of sight and then walked slowly in the direction of the villa. I was at once confused and amazed by Theodore. First, since he was obviously a scientist of considerable repute, he was to me a person of great importance. In fact he was the only person I had met until now who seemed to share my enthusiasm for zoology. Secondly, I was extremely flattered to find that he treated me exactly as though I were his own age. I liked him for this; Theodore not only talked to me as though I were grown up, but also as though I were as knowledgeable as he. I hoped to see him again, for there were many things I wanted to ask him, but I felt it would be unlikely that he would have very much time to spare for me. I was mistaken, however, for two days later Leslie came back from an excursion into the town and handed me a small parcel.

"Met that bearded johnny," he said laconically; "you know, that scientist bloke. Said this was for you."

Incredulously I stared at the parcel. I tore off the paper as quickly as I could. Inside was a small box and a letter.

My dear Gerry Durrell,

I wondered, after our conversation the other day, if it might not assist your investigation of the local natural history to have some form of magnifying instrument. I am

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therefore sending you this pocket microscope, in the hope that it will be of some use to you. It is, of course, not of very high magnification, but you will find it sufficient for field work.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Theo. Stephanides

P.S. If you have nothing better to do on Thursday, perhaps you would care to come to tea, and I could then show you some of my microscope slides.



THE SWEET SPRING

During the last days of the dying summer, and throughout the warm, wet winter that followed, tea with Theodore became a weekly affair. Every Thursday I would set out, my pockets bulging with match-boxes and test-tubes full of specimens, to be driven into the town by Spiro. It was an appointment that I would not have missed for anything.

Theodore would welcome me in his study, a room that was, in my opinion, just what a room should be. The walls were lined with tall bookshelves filled with volumes on freshwater biology, botany, astronomy, medicine, folklore and similar fascinating and sensible subjects. At one window of the room stood Theodore's telescope, while the sills of every window bore a parade of jars and bottles containing minute freshwater fauna. On one side of the room was a massive desk, piled high with scrapbooks, micro-photographs, X-ray plates, diaries, and notebooks. On the opposite side of the room was the microscope table, with its powerful lamp on the jointed stem leaning like a lily over the flat boxes that housed Theodore's collection of slides. The microscopes themselves were housed under a series of beehive-like domes of glass.

"How are you?" Theodore would inquire, as if I were a com-

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plete stranger, and give me his characteristic handshake—a sharp downward tug, like a man testing a knot in a rope. The formalities being over, we could then turn our minds to more important topics.

"I was . . . er . . . you know . . . looking through my slides just before your arrival, and I came across one which may interest you. It is a slide of the mouth-parts of the rat flea . . . *ceratophyllus fasciatus*, you know. Now, I'll just adjust the microscope. . . . There! . . . You see? Very curious. I mean to say, you could almost imagine it was a human face, couldn't you? Now I had another . . . er . . . slide here. . . ."

So, absorbed and happy, we would pore over the microscope. Filled with enthusiasm, we would tack from subject to subject. To me Theodore's knowledge seemed inexhaustible. He was a rich vein of information, and I mined him assiduously. No matter what the subject, Theodore could contribute something interesting to it. At last I would hear Spiro honking his horn in the street below, and I would rise reluctantly to go.

"Good-bye," Theodore would say, tugging my hand. "It's been a pleasure having you . . . er . . . no, no, not at all. See you next Thursday. When the weather gets better . . . er . . . less damp . . . in the *spring*, you know . . . perhaps we might go for some walks together . . . see what we can obtain . . . um, yes. . . . Well, good-bye. . . . Not at all."

With March came the spring, and the island was flower-filled, scented, and aflutter with new leaves. Waxy yellow crocuses appeared in great clusters, bubbling out among the tree roots and tumbling down the banks. Under the myrtles, the grapehyacinths lifted buds like magenta sugar-drops, and the gloom of the oak thickets was filled with the dim smoke of a thousand blue day-irises.

Spring affected the family in a variety of ways. Larry bought himself a guitar and a large barrel of strong red wine. He interspersed his bouts of work by playing haphazardly on the instrument and singing Elizabethan love songs in a meek tenor voice, with frequent pauses for refreshment.

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Margo was always badly affected by the spring. Her personal appearance, always of absorbing interest to her, now became almost an obsession. Piles of freshly laundered clothes filled her bedroom, while the washing-line sagged under the weight of clothes newly washed. Singing shrilly and untunefully she would drift about the villa, carrying piles of flimsy underwear or bottles of scent. She would seize every opportunity to dive into the bathroom, in a swirl of white towels, and once in there she was as hard to dislodge as a limpet from a rock. The family in turn would bellow and batter on the door, getting no more satisfaction than an assurance that she was nearly finished, an assurance which we had learned by bitter experience not to have any faith in. Eventually she would emerge, glowing and immaculate, and drift from the house, humming, to sun-bathe in the olive groves or go down to the sea and swim. It was during one of these excursions to the sea that she met an over-good-looking young Turk. With unusual modesty she did not inform anyone of her frequent bathing assignations with this paragon, feeling, as she told us later, that we would not be interested. It was, of course, Spiro who discovered it. He watched over Margo's welfare with the earnest concern of a St. Bernard, and there was precious little she could do without Spiro's knowing about it. He cornered Mother in the kitchen one morning, glanced surreptitiously round to make sure they were not overheard, sighed deeply, and broke the news to her.

"I'm very sorrys to haves to tells you this, Mrs. Durrells," he rumbled, "buts I thinks you oughts to knows."

Mother had by now become quite used to Spiro's conspiratorial air when he came to deliver some item of information about the family, and it no longer worried her.

"What's the matter now, Spiro?" she asked.

"It's Missy Margo," said Spiro sorrowfully.

"What about her?"

Spiro glanced round uneasily.

"Dos you knows shes meetings a *mans*?" he inquired in a vibrant whisper.

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"A man? Oh . . . er . . . yes, I did know," said Mother, lying valiantly.

Spiro hitched up his trousers over his belly and leaned forward.

"But did you know he's a *Turk*?" he questioned in tones of bloodcurdling ferocity.

"A Turk?" said Mother vaguely. "No, I didn't know he was a Turk. What's wrong with that?"

Spiro looked horrified.

"Gollys, Mrs. Durrells, what's wrongs with it? He's a *Turk*. I wouldn't trust a sonofabitch Turk with any girls. He'll cut her throats, that's what he'll do. Honest to God, Mrs. Durrells, it's not safe, Missy Margo swimmin' with him."

"All right, Spiro," said Mother soothingly, "I'll speak to Margo about it."

Acting on the information received, Mother mentioned the matter to Margo, in a slightly less bloodcurdling manner than Spiro's, and suggested that the young Turk be brought up to tea. Delighted, Margo went off to fetch him, while Mother hastily made a cake and some scones, and warned the rest of us to be on our best behaviour. The Turk, when he arrived, turned out to be a tall young man, with meticulously waved hair and a flashy smile that managed to convey the minimum of humour with the maximum of condescension. He had all the sleek, smug self-possession of a cat in season. He pressed Mother's hand to his lips as though he were conferring an honour on her, and scattered the largesse of his smile for the rest of us. Mother, feeling the hackles of the family rising, threw herself desperately into the breach.

"Lovely having you . . . wanted so often . . . never seems time, you know . . . days simply *fly* past . . . Margo's told us so much about you . . . do have a scone . . ." she said breathlessly, smiling with dazzling charm and handing him a piece of cake.

"So kind," murmured the Turk, leaving us in some doubt as to whether he was referring to us or himself.

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"He's on holiday here," announced Margo suddenly, as though it were something quite unique.

"Really?" said Larry waspishly. "On holiday? Amazing!"

"I had a holiday once," said Leslie indistinctly through a mouthful of cake; "remember it clearly."

Mother rattled the tea things nervously, and glared at them.

"Sugar?" she inquired fruitily. "Sugar in your tea?"

"Thank you, yes."

There was another short silence, during which we all sat and watched Mother pouring out the tea and searching her mind desperately for a topic of conversation. At length the Turk turned to Larry.

"You write, I believe?" he said with complete lack of interest.

Larry's eyes glittered. Mother, seeing the danger signs, rushed in quickly before he could reply.

"Yes, yes," she smiled, "he writes away, day after day. Always tapping at the typewriter."

"I always feel that I could write superbly if I tried," remarked the Turk.

"Really?" said Mother. "Yes, well, it's a gift, I suppose, like so many things."

"He swims well," remarked Margo, "and he goes out terribly far."

"I have no fear," said the Turk modestly. "I am a superb swimmer, so I have no fear. When I ride the horse, I have no fear, for I ride superbly. I can sail the boat magnificently in the typhoon without fear."

He sipped his tea delicately, regarding our awestruck faces with approval.

"You see, he went on, in case we had missed the point, "you see, I am not a fearful man."

The result of the tea party was that the next day Margo received a note from the Turk asking her if she would accompany him to the cinema that evening.

"Do you think I ought to go?" she asked Mother.

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"If you want to, dear," Mother answered, adding firmly, "but tell him I'm coming too."

"That should be a jolly evening for you," remarked Larry.

"Oh, Mother, you can't," protested Margo; "he'll think it so queer."

"Nonsense, dear," said Mother vaguely. "Turks are quite used to chaperones and things . . . look at their harems."

So that evening Mother and Margo, dressed becomingly, made their way down the hill to meet the Turk. The only cinema was an open-air one in the town, and we calculated that the show should be over by ten at the latest. Larry, Leslie, and I waited eagerly for their return. At half-past one in the morning Margo and Mother, in the last stages of exhaustion, crept into the villa and sank into chairs.

"Oh, so you've come back?" said Larry. "We thought you'd flown with him. We imagined you galloping about Constantinople on camels, your yashmaks rippling seductively in the breeze."

"We've had the most awful evening," said Mother, easing her shoes off, "really awful."

"What happened?" asked Leslie.

"Well, to begin with he stank of the most frightful perfume," said Margo, "and that put me off straight away."

"We went in the cheapest seats, so close to the screen that I got a headache," said Mother, "and simply crammed together like sardines. It was so oppressive I couldn't breathe. And then, to crown it all, I got a flea. It was nothing to laugh at, Larry; really I didn't know what to do. The blessed thing got inside my corsets and I could feel it running about. I couldn't very well scratch, it would have looked so peculiar. I had to keep pressing myself against the seat. I think he noticed, though . . . he kept giving me funny looks from the corner of his eye. Then in the interval he went out and came back with some of that horrible, sickly Turkish Delight, and before long we were all covered with white sugar, and I had a dreadful thirst. In the second interval he went out and came back with flowers. I ask you, dear, flowers

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in the middle of the cinema. That's Margo's bouquet, on the table."

Mother pointed to a massive bunch of spring flowers, tied up in a tangle of coloured ribbons. She delved into her bag and produced a minute bunch of violets.

"This," she said, "was for me."

"But the worst part was coming home," said Margo.

"A dreadful journey!" Mother agreed. "When we came out of the cinema I thought we were going to get a car, but no, he hustled us into a cab, and a very smelly one at that. Really, I think he must be mental to try and come all that way in a cab. Anyway, it took us hours and *hours*, because the poor horse was tired, and I was sitting there trying to be polite, dying to scratch myself, and longing for a drink. All the fool could do was to sit there grinning at Margo and singing Turkish love songs. I could have cheerfully hit him. We couldn't even get rid of him at the bottom of the hill. He insisted on coming up with us, armed with a huge stick, because he said the forests were full of serpents at this time of the year. I'm afraid you'll just *have* to choose your boy friends more carefully in future, Margo. I can't go through that sort of thing again. I was terrified he'd come right up to the door and we'd have to ask him in. I thought *we'd* never get away."

"You obviously didn't make yourself fearful enough," said Larry.

For Leslie the coming of spring meant the soft pipe of wings as the turtle-doves and wood-pigeons arrived, and the sudden flash and scuttle of a hare among the myrtles. So, after visiting numerous gun shops and after much technical argument, he returned to the villa one day proudly carrying a double-barreled shotgun. His first action was to take it to his room, strip it down, and clean it, while I stood and watched, fascinated by the gleaming barrels and stock.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he crooned, more to himself than to me. Tenderly he ran his hands over the silken shape of the weapon.

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Then he whipped it suddenly to his shoulder and followed an imaginary flock of birds across the ceiling of the room.

"We'll have a try for some turtle-doves tomorrow, shall we?" he said. "They start coming over about six. That little hill across the valley is a good place."

So at dawn he and I hurried through the hunched and misty olive groves, up the valley where the myrtles were wet and squeaky with dew, and on to the top of the little hill. We stood waist-deep among the vines, waiting for the birds to start flighting. Suddenly the pale morning sky was flecked with dark specs. Leslie waited, standing with legs apart, gun-stock resting on his hip, his eyes following the birds. Nearer and nearer they flew, until it seemed that they must fly past us and be lost. At the very last moment the gun leaped smoothly to his shoulder and jerked as the report echoed briefly, like the crack of a great branch in a still forest. The turtle-dove, one minute so swift and intent in its flight, now fell languidly to earth, followed by a swirl of soft, cinnamon-coloured feathers. When five doves hung from his belt, he lit a cigarette and cuddled the gun under his arm.

"Come on," he said; "we've got enough. Let's give the poor devils a rest."

We returned through the sun-striped olive groves where the chaffinches were pinking like a hundred tiny coins among the leaves. Yani, the shepherd, was driving his herd of goats out to graze. His brown face, with its great sweep of nicotine-stained moustache, wrinkled into a smile; a gnarled hand appeared from the heavy folds of his sheepskin cloak and was raised in salute.

"*Chairete*," he called in his deep voice, the beautiful Greek greeting, "*chairete, kyrioi* . . . be happy."

The goats poured among the olives, uttering stammering cries to each other, the leader's bell clonking rhythmically. The chaffinches tinkled excitedly. The island was drenched with dew, radiant with early morning sun, full of stirring life. Be happy. How could one be anything else in such a season?



THE DAFFODIL-YELLOW VILLA

As soon as we had settled down and started to enjoy the island, Larry, with characteristic generosity, wrote to all his friends and asked them to come out and stay. The fact that the villa was only just big enough to house the family apparently had not occurred to him.

"I've asked a few people out for a week or so," he said casually to Mother one morning.

"That will be nice, dear," said Mother unthinkingly.

"I thought it would do us good to have some intelligent and stimulating company around. We don't want to stagnate."

"You'd better let the Pension Suisse know when they're coming," Mother remarked.

"What for?" asked Larry, surprised.

"So they can reserve the rooms," said Mother, equally surprised.

"But I've invited them to stay here," Larry pointed out.

"Larry! You haven't! Really, you are most *thoughtless*. How can they possibly stay here? There's hardly enough room for us, as it is."

"Nonsense, Mother, there's plenty of room if the place is organized properly. If Margo and Les sleep out on the veranda, that gives you two rooms; you and Gerry could move into the drawing-room, and that would leave those rooms free."

"Don't be silly, dear. We can't all camp out all over the place like gypsies. There simply isn't room to entertain in this villa. You'll just have to write to these people and put them off."

"I can't put them off," said Larry. "They're on their way."

"Really, Larry, you are the most annoying creature. You wait until they're nearly here, and then you tell me."

"I do wish you'd stop fussing," said Larry irritably; "there's quite a simple solution to the whole business."

"What?" asked Mother suspiciously.

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"Well, since the villa isn't big enough, let's move to one that is."

"But, Larry dear, do be reasonable. We can't just rush to a new villa because some people are coming. I doubt whether we'd find one in time, anyway. And there's Gerry's lessons."

"All that could easily be sorted out if you put your mind to it."

"We are *not* moving to another villa," said Mother firmly; "I've made up my mind about that."

She straightened her spectacles, gave Larry a defiant glare, and strutted off towards the kitchen, registering determination in every inch.

The new villa was enormous, a tall, square Venetian mansion, with faded daffodil-yellow walls, green shutters, and a fox-red roof. The house and land were gently, sadly decaying, lying forgotten on the hillside overlooking the shining sea and the dark, eroded hills of Albania. It was as though villa and landscape were half asleep, lying there drugged in the spring sunshine, giving themselves up to the moss, the ferns, and the crowds of tiny toadstools.

It was Spiro, of course, who had found the place, and who organized our move with the minimum of fuss and the maximum of efficiency. Within three days of seeing the villa for the first time the long wooden carts were trailing in a dusty procession along the roads, piled high with our possessions, and on the fourth day we were installed.

There were, however, snags in the house. The furniture (which we had rented with the villa) was a fantastic collection of ungainly Victorian relics that had been locked in the rooms for the past twenty years. The first evening the leg came off the dining-room table, cascading the food onto the floor. Some days later Larry sat down on an immense and solid-looking chair, only to have the back disappear in a cloud of acrid dust. When Mother went to open a wardrobe the size of a cottage and the

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entire door came away in her hand, she decided that something must be done.

"We simply can't have people to stay in a house where everything comes to bits if you look at it," she said. "There's nothing for it, we'll have to buy some new furniture. Really, these guests are going to be the most expensive we've ever had."

The next morning Spiro drove Mother, Margo, and myself into the town to buy furniture. We noticed that the town was more crowded than usual, but it never occurred to us that anything special was happening until we had finished bargaining with the dealer and made our way out of his shop into the narrow, twisted streets. We were jostled and pushed as we struggled to get back to the place where we had left the car. The crowd grew thicker and thicker, and the people were so tightly wedged together that we were carried forward against our will.

"I think there must be something going on," said Margo observantly. "Maybe it's a fiesta or something interesting."

"I can't care *what* it is, as long as we get back to the car," said Mother.

But we were swept along, in the opposite direction to the car, and eventually pushed out to join a vast crowd assembled in the main square of the town. I asked an elderly peasant woman near me what was happening.

"It is Saint Spiridion, *kyria*," she explained. "Today we may enter the church and kiss his feet."

Saint Spiridion was the patron saint of the island. His mummified body was enshrined in a silver coffin in the church, and once a year he was carried in procession round the town. He was very powerful, and could grant requests, cure illness, and do a number of other wonderful things for you if he happened to be in the right mood when asked. The islanders worshipped him, and every second male on the island was called Spiro in his honour. Today was a special day; apparently they would open the coffin and allow the faithful to kiss the slippered feet of the mummy, and make any request they cared to.

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The great multicoloured wedge of humanity moved slowly towards the dark door of the church, and we were swept along with it. By now Margo had been pushed well ahead of me, while Mother was equally far behind. I was caught firmly between five fat peasant women, while Mother was hopelessly entangled between two enormous Albanian shepherds. Steadily, firmly, we were pushed up the steps and into the church.

Inside, it was dark as a well, lit only by a bed of candles that bloomed like yellow crocuses along one wall. A bearded, tall-hatted priest clad in black robes flapped like a crow in the gloom, making the crowd form into a single line that filed down the church, past the great silver coffin and out through another door into the street. The coffin was standing upright, looking like a silver chrysalis, and at its lower end a portion had been removed so that the saint's feet, clad in the richly-embroidered slippers, peeped out. As each person reached the coffin he bent, kissed the feet, and murmured a prayer, while at the top of the sarcophagus the saint's black and withered face peered out of a glass panel with an expression of acute distaste. It became evident that, whether we wanted to or not, we were going to kiss Saint Spiridion's feet. I looked back and saw Mother making frantic efforts to get to my side, but the Albanian bodyguard would not give an inch, and she struggled ineffectually. Presently she caught my eye and started to grimace and point at the coffin, shaking her head vigorously and hissing at me over the heads of the crowd, "Tell Margo . . . *not* to kiss . . . kiss the air . . . kiss the *air*."

I turned to deliver Mother's message to Margo, but it was too late; there she was, crouched over the slippered feet, kissing them with an enthusiasm that enchanted and greatly surprised the crowd. When it came to my turn I obeyed Mother's instructions, kissing loudly and with a considerable show of reverence a point some six inches above the mummy's left foot. Then I was pushed along and disgorged through the church door and out into the street. Margo was waiting on the steps, looking extremely self-satisfied. The next moment Mother appeared,

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shot from the door by the brawny shoulders of her shepherds.

"Those *shepherds*," she exclaimed faintly. "So ill-mannered . . . the smell nearly killed me . . . a mixture of incense and garlic. . . . How do they manage to smell like that?"

"Oh, well," said Margo cheerfully. "It'll have been worth it if Saint Spiridion answers my request."

"A most *insanitary* procedure," said Mother, "more likely to spread disease than cure it. I dread to think what we would have caught if we'd *really* kissed his feet."

"But I kissed his feet," said Margo, surprised.

"Margo! You didn't!"

"Well, everyone else was doing it."

"And after I expressly told you *not* to."

"You never told me not to. . . ."

I interrupted and explained that I had been too late with Mother's warning.

"After all those people have been slobbering over those slippers you have to go and kiss them."

"I was only doing what the others did."

"I can't think what on earth possessed you to *do* such a thing."

"Well, I thought he might cure my acne."

"Acne!" said Mother scornfully. "You'll be lucky if you don't catch something to go with the acne."

The next day Margo went down with a severe attack of influenza, and Saint Spiridion's prestige with Mother reached rock bottom. Spiro was sent racing into the town for a doctor, and he returned bringing a little dumpy man with patent-leather hair, a faint wisp of moustache, and shoe-button eyes behind great horn-rimmed spectacles. This was Doctor Androuchelli. He was a charming man, with a bedside manner that was quite unique.

"Po-po-po," he said, strutting into the bedroom and regarding Margo with scorn, "po-po-po! Remarkably unintelligent you have been, no? Kissing the saint's feet! Po-po-po-po-po! Nearly you might have caught some bugs unpleasant. You are lucky; she is influenza. Now you will do as I tell you, or I will rinse my hands

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of you. And please do not increase my work with such stupidity. If you kiss another saint's feet in the future I will not come to cure you. . . . Po-po-po . . . such a thing to do."

So while Margo languished in bed for three weeks, with Androuchelli po-po-ing over her every two or three days, the rest of us settled into the villa. Larry took possession of one enormous attic and engaged two carpenters to make bookshelves; Leslie converted the large covered veranda behind the house into a shooting gallery, and hung an enormous red flag up outside whenever he was practising; Mother pottered absently round the vast, subterranean, stone-flagged kitchen. For Roger and myself, of course, there were fifteen acres of garden to explore, a vast new paradise sloping down to the shallow, tepid sea. Being temporarily without a tutor (for George had left the island) I could spend the whole day out, only returning to the villa for hurried meals.

Throughout the spring and early summer, the villa was filled with an apparently endless stream of Larry's friends. Sometimes a fresh load of guests would turn up before we had got rid of the previous group, and the chaos was indescribable; the house and garden would be dotted with poets, authors, artists, and playwrights arguing, painting, drinking, typing, and composing.

One of the first to arrive was Zatopec, an Armenian poet, a short, stocky individual with a swooping eagle nose, a shoulder-length mane of silvery hair, and hands bulbous and twisted by arthritis. He arrived wearing an immense, swirling black cloak and a broad-brimmed black hat, riding in a carriage piled high with wine. His voice shook the house like a sirocco as he swept into it, his cloak rippling, his arms full of bottles. He scarcely stopped talking the whole time he stayed. He talked from morning till night, drinking prodigious quantities of wine, snatching forty winks wherever he happened to be, and rarely going to bed at all. In spite of his advanced years he had lost none of his enthusiasm for the opposite sex, and, while he treated Mother and Margo with a sort of creaking, antique courtesy, no

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peasant girl for miles was free from his attentions. He would hobble through the olive groves after them, roaring with laughter, shouting endearments, his cloak flapping behind him, his pocket bulging with a bottle of wine.

The next invasion consisted of three artists, Jonquil, Durant, and Michael. Jonquil looked, and sounded, like a cockney owl with a fringe; Durant was lank and mournful and so nervous that he would almost jump out of his skin if you spoke to him suddenly; by contrast, Michael was a short, fat, somnambulistic little man who looked like a well-boiled prawn with a mop of dark, curly hair. These three had only one thing in common, and that was a desire to get some work done. Jonquil, on striding into the house for the first time, made this quite clear to a startled Mother.

"I didn't come for no bleeding 'oliday," she said severely; "I came to get some work done, so I'm not interested in picnics and such, see?"

"Oh . . . er . . . no, no, of course not," said Mother guiltily, as though she had been planning vast banquets among the myrtle bushes for Jonquil's benefit.

Jonquil promptly retired to the garden, clad in a bathing costume, and slept peacefully in the sun throughout her stay.

Durant, he informed us, wanted to work too, but first he had to get his nerve back. He was shattered, he told us, by his recent experience. Apparently, while in Italy he had suddenly been seized with the desire to paint a masterpiece. After much thought he decided that an almond orchard in full bloom should give a certain scope to his brush. At long last he found the perfect one; the setting was magnificent and the blooms were full and thick. Feverishly he set to work, and by the end of the first day he had got the basis down on canvas. Tired, but satisfied, he packed up his things and returned to the village. After a good night's sleep he awoke refreshed and invigorated, and rushed back to the orchard to complete his picture. On arrival there he was struck dumb with horror and amazement, for every tree was gaunt and bare, while the ground was thickly carpeted with

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pink and white petals. Apparently during the night a spring storm had playfully stripped all the orchards in the vicinity of their blossom, including Durant's special one.

"I was stricken," he told us, his voice quivering, his eyes filled with tears. "I swore I would never paint again . . . never! But slowly I am recovering my nerves. . . . Sometime I will start to paint again."

On inquiry, it turned out that this unfortunate experience had taken place two years previously, and he had still not recovered.

Michael got off to a bad start. He was captivated by the colouring of the island, and told us enthusiastically that he would begin work on an immense canvas that would capture the very essence of Corfu. He could hardly wait to start. It was most unfortunate that he happened to be a prey to asthma. It was equally unfortunate that Mother had placed on a chair in his room a blanket which I used for horse-riding, there being no saddles available. In the middle of the night we were awakened by a noise that sounded like a troop of bloodhounds being slowly strangled. Assembling sleepily in Michael's room we found him wheezing and gasping, the sweat running down his face. While Margo rushed to make some tea and Larry to get some brandy, Leslie opened the windows and Mother put Michael back to bed, and, since he was now clammy with sweat, tenderly covered him with the horse-blanket. To our surprise, in spite of all remedies, he got worse.

"I wonder what could have brought this on," said Mother. "Are you allergic to something, Michael?"

Between gasps Michael informed us that he was only allergic to three things: the pollen of the lilac flowers, cats, and horses. We all peered out of the window, but there was not a lilac tree for miles. We searched the room, but there was no cat hidden anywhere. I indignantly denied Larry's accusation that I had smuggled a horse into the house. It was only when Michael seemed on the verge of death that we noticed the horse-rug, which Mother had tucked carefully under his chin. This incident had such a bad effect on the poor man that he was quite

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unable to put a brush to canvas during his stay; he and Durant lay side by side in deck-chairs, recovering their nerve together.



THE WORLD IN A WALL

The crumbling wall that surrounded the sunken garden alongside the house was a rich hunting ground for me. It was an ancient brick wall that had been plastered over, but now this outer skin was green with moss, bulging and sagging with the damp of many winters.

The inhabitants of the wall were a mixed lot, and they were divided into day and night workers, the hunters and the hunted. At night the hunters were the toads that lived among the brambles, and the geckos, pale, translucent, with bulging eyes, that lived in the cracks higher up the wall. Their prey was the population of stupid, absent-minded crane-flies that zoomed and barged their way among the leaves; moths of all sizes and shapes; the beetles, rotund and neatly clad as business men, hurrying with portly efficiency about their night's work. When the sun rose, the wall was taken over by the next set of inhabitants. Here it was more difficult to differentiate between the prey and the predators, for everything seemed to feed indiscriminately off everything else. Thus the hunting wasps searched out caterpillars and spiders; the spiders hunted for flies: the dragonflies fed off the spiders and the flies; and the wall lizards fed off everything.

But the shyest and most self-effacing of the wall community were the most dangerous; you hardly ever saw one unless you looked for it, and yet there must have been several hundred living in the cracks of the wall. Slide a knife-blade carefully under a piece of the loose plaster and lever it gently away from the brick, and there, crouching beneath it, would be a little black scorpion an inch long, looking as though he were made out of

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polished chocolate. They were weird-looking little things, with their flattened, oval bodies, their neat, crooked legs, the enormous crablike claws, bulbous and neatly jointed as armour, and the tail like a string of brown beads ending in a sting like a rose-thorn.

I grew very fond of these scorpions. I found them to be pleasant, unassuming creatures with, on the whole, the most charming habits. Provided you did nothing silly or clumsy (like putting your hand on one) the scorpions treated you with respect, their one desire being to get away and hide as quickly as possible.

One day I found a fat female scorpion in the wall, wearing what at first glance appeared to be a pale fawn fur coat. Closer inspection proved that this strange garment was made up of a mass of tiny babies clinging to the mother's back. I was enraptured by this family, and I made up my mind to smuggle them into the house and up to my bedroom so that I might keep them and watch them grow up. With infinite care I manœuvred the mother and family into a match-box, and then hurried to the villa. It was rather unfortunate that just as I entered the door lunch should be served; however, I placed the match-box carefully on the mantelpiece in the drawing-room, and made my way to the dining-room and joined the family for the meal. Dawdling over my food, feeding Roger surreptitiously under the table, and listening to the family arguing, I completely forgot about my exciting new captures. At last Larry, having finished, fetched the cigarettes from the drawing-room, and lying back in his chair he put one in his mouth and picked up the match-box he had brought and opened it.

Now I maintain to this day that the female scorpion meant no harm. She was agitated and a trifle annoyed at being shut up in a match-box for so long, and so she seized the first opportunity to escape. She hoisted herself out of the box with great rapidity, her babies clinging on desperately, and scuttled onto the back of Larry's hand, whereupon he uttered a roar of fright that brought Roger out from beneath the table, barking wildly.

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With a flick of his hand he sent the unfortunate scorpion flying down the table, and she landed midway between Margo and Leslie, scattering babies like confetti as she thumped onto the cloth. Thoroughly enraged at this treatment, the creature sped towards Leslie, her sting quivering with emotion. Leslie leaped to his feet, overturning his chair, and flicked out desperately with his napkin, sending the scorpion rolling across the cloth towards Margo, who promptly let out a scream that any railway engine would have been proud to produce. Mother, completely bewildered by this sudden and rapid change from peace to chaos, put on her glasses and peered down the table to see what was causing the pandemonium, and at that moment Margo, in a vain attempt to stop the scorpion's advance, hurled a glass of water at it. The shower missed the animal completely, but successfully drenched Mother, who, not being able to stand cold water, promptly lost her breath and sat gasping at the end of the table, unable even to protest. The scorpion had now gone to ground under Leslie's plate, while her babies swarmed wildly all over the table. Roger, mystified by the panic, but determined to do his share, ran round and round the room, barking hysterically.

"It's that bloody boy again . . ." bellowed Larry.

"Look out! Look out! They're coming!" screamed Margo.

"All we need is a book," roared Leslie; "don't panic, hit 'em with a book."

"What on earth's the *matter* with you all?" Mother kept imploring, mopping her glasses.

"It's that bloody boy . . . he'll kill the lot of us. . . . Look at the table . . . knee-deep in scorpions. . . ."

"Quick . . . quick . . . do something. . . . Look out, look out!"

"But *how* did the scorpions get on the table, dear?"

"That bloody boy. . . . Every match-box in the house is a death-trap. . . ."

"Look out, it's coming towards me. . . . Quick, quick, do something. . . ."

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By the time a certain amount of order had been restored, all the baby scorpions had hidden themselves under various plates and bits of cutlery. Eventually, after impassioned pleas on my part, backed up by Mother, Leslie's suggestion that the whole lot be slaughtered was quashed. While the family, still simmering with rage and fright, retired to the drawing-room, I spent half an hour rounding up the babies, picking them up in a teaspoon, and returning them to their mother's back. Then I carried them outside on a saucer and, with the utmost reluctance, released them on the garden wall. Roger and I went and spent the afternoon on the hillside, for I felt it would be prudent to allow the family to have a siesta before seeing them again.

The result of this incident was that Mother decided I was running wild again, and that it was high time I received a little more education. So Peter came to tutor me, a tall, handsome young man, fresh from Oxford, with decided ideas on education which I found rather trying to begin with. But gradually the atmosphere of the island worked its way insidiously under his skin, and he relaxed and became quite human. At first the lessons were painful to an extreme: interminable wrestling with fractions and percentages, geological strata and warm currents, nouns, verbs, and adverbs. But, as the sunshine worked its magic on Peter, the fractions and percentages were gradually pushed more and more into the background; he discovered that the intricacies of geological strata and the effects of warm currents could be explained much more easily while swimming along the coast, while the simplest way of teaching me English was to allow me to write something each day which he would correct. I suggested I write a book, and Peter, somewhat startled, but not being able to think of any reason why I should *not* write a book, agreed. So every morning I spent a happy hour or so adding another chapter to my epic, a stirring tale which involved a voyage round the world with the family, during which we captured every conceivable kind of fauna in the most unlikely traps.

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While I was at work on my masterpiece, Peter and Margo would take a stroll in the sunken garden to look at the flowers. To my surprise, they had both suddenly become very botanically minded. In this way the mornings passed very pleasantly for all concerned.

After the unfortunate affair of the scorpion, the family had given me a large room on the first floor in which to house my beasts, in the vague hope that this would confine them to one particular portion of the house. This room—which I called my study, and which the rest of the family called the Bug House—smelled pleasantly of ether and methylated spirits. It was here that I kept my natural-history books, my diary, microscope, dissecting instruments, nets, collecting bags, and other important items. Large cardboard boxes housed my birds'-egg, beetle, butterfly, and dragon-fly collections, while on the shelves above were a fine range of bottles full of methylated spirits in which were preserved such interesting items as a four-legged chicken, various lizards and snakes, frog-spawn in different stages of growth, a baby octopus, three half-grown brown rats (a contribution from Roger), and a minute tortoise, newly hatched, that had been unable to survive the winter. The walls were sparsely, but tastefully, decorated with a slab slate containing the fossilized remains of a fish, a photograph of myself shaking hands with a chimpanzee, and a stuffed bat. I had prepared the bat myself, without assistance, and I was extremely proud of the result. Considering how limited my knowledge of taxidermy was, it looked, I thought, extremely *like* a bat, especially if you stood at the other side of the room. With wings outstretched it glowered down from the wall from its slab of cork. When summer came, however, the bat appeared to feel the heat; it sagged a little, its coat no longer glossy, and a new and mysterious smell started to make itself felt above the ether and methylated spirits. Poor Roger was wrongly accused at first, and it was only later, when the smell had penetrated even to Larry's bedroom, that a thorough investigation traced the odour to my bat. I was surprised and not a little annoyed. Under pressure I was

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forced to get rid of it. Peter explained that I had not cured it properly, and said that if I could obtain another specimen he would show me the correct procedure. I thanked him profusely, but explained that I felt the family now looked with a suspicious eye on the art of taxidermy, and it would require a lot of tedious persuasion to get them into an agreeable frame of mind.



THE ENCHANTED ARCHIPELAGO

In the summer, when the moon was full, the family took to bathing at night, for during the day the sun was so fierce that the sea became too hot to be refreshing. As soon as the moon had risen we would make our way down through the trees to the creaking wooden jetty, and clamber into our boat, the *Sea Cow*. With Larry and Peter on one oar, Margo and Leslie on the other, and Roger and myself in the bows to act as look-outs, we would drift down the coast for half a mile or so to where there was a small bay with a lip of white sand and a few carefully arranged boulders, smooth and still sun-warm, ideal for sitting on. We would anchor the *Sea Cow* in deep water and then dive over the side to gambol and plunge, and set the moonlight shaking across the waters of the bay.

As the summer grew hotter and hotter we decided that it required too much effort to row the *Sea Cow* down the coast to our bathing bay, so we invested in an outboard engine. The acquisition of this machine opened up a vast area of coastland for us, for we could now venture much farther afield, making trips along the jagged coastline to remote and deserted beaches. It was thus that I became aware of the fact that stretching along the coast for miles was a scattered archipelago of small islands. For some reason, which I could not discover, the sea faunæ were greatly attracted by this archipelago, and round the edges of the islands, in rock-pools and sandy bays the size of a large

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table, there was a bewildering assortment of life. I managed to inveigle the family into several trips to these islets, but as these had few good bathing spots the family soon got bored with having to sit on sun-baked rocks while I fished interminably in the pools and unearthed at intervals strange and, to them, revolting sea-creatures.

Our trips there became less and less frequent, in spite of all arguments on my part, and I was tortured by the thought of all the wonderful animal life waiting in the limpid pools to be caught; but I was unable to do anything about it, simply because I had no boat. I suggested that I might be allowed to take the *Sea Cow* out myself, say once a week, but the family were, for a variety of reasons, against this. But then, just when I had almost given up hope, I was struck with a brilliant idea: my birthday was due fairly soon, and if I dealt with the family skilfully I felt sure I could get not only a boat but a lot of other equipment as well. I therefore suggested to the family that, instead of letting them choose my birthday presents, I might tell them the things which I wanted most. In this way they could be sure of not disappointing me. The family, rather taken aback, agreed, and then, somewhat suspiciously, asked me what I wanted. Innocently, I said that I hadn't thought about it much, but that I would work out a list for each person, and they could then choose one or more items on it.

My list took a lot of time and thought to work out, and a considerable amount of applied psychology. Mother, for instance, I knew would buy me everything on her list, so I put down some of the most necessary and expensive equipment: five wooden cases, glass-topped, cork-lined, to house my insect collection; two dozen test-tubes; five pints of methylated spirits, five pints of formalin, and a microscope. Margo's list was a little more difficult, for the items had to be chosen so that they would encourage her to go to her favourite shops. So from her I asked for ten yards of butter muslin, ten yards of white calico, six large packets of pins, two bundles of cotton wool, two pints of ether, a pair of forceps, and two fountain-pen fillers. It was, I realized

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resignedly, quite useless to ask Larry for anything like formalin or pins, but if my list showed some sort of literary leaning I stood a good chance. Accordingly I made out a formidable sheet covered with the titles, authors' names, publishers, and prices of all the natural history books I felt in need of, and put an asterisk against those that would be most gratefully received. Since I had only one request left, I decided to tackle Leslie verbally instead of handing him a list, and I casually asked him what he would like to give me for my birthday.

"Hadn't thought about it," he replied absently. "I don't mind . . . anything you like . . . you choose."

I said I wanted a boat. Leslie, realizing how he had been trapped, said indignantly that a boat was far too large a present for a birthday, and anyway he couldn't afford it. I said, equally indignantly, that he had *told* me to choose what I liked, and anyway I didn't expect him to buy me one. I had thought, since he knew so much about boats, he would be able to build me one. However, if he thought that would be too difficult . . .

"Of course it's not difficult," said Leslie, unguardedly, and then added hastily, "Well . . . not terribly difficult. But it's the *time*. It would take ages and ages to do. Look, wouldn't it be better if I took you out in the *Sea Cow* twice a week?"

But I was adamant; I wanted a boat and I was quite prepared to wait for it.

"Oh, all right, all right," said Leslie exasperatedly, "I'll build you a boat. But I'm not having you hanging around while I do it, understand? You're to keep well away. You're not to see it until it's finished."

The day before my birthday the entire family made an expedition into the town. There were two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to purchase my presents. Secondly, the larder had to be stocked up. We had agreed that we would not invite a lot of people to the party; we said we didn't like crowds, and so ten guests, carefully selected, were the most we were prepared to put up with. It would be a small but distinguished gathering of people we

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liked best. Having unanimously decided on this, each member of the family then proceeded to invite ten people. Unfortunately they didn't all invite the same ten, with the exception of Theodore, who received five separate invitations. The result was that Mother, on the eve of the party, suddenly discovered we were going to have not ten guests but forty-six. So, we swept into town in the morning and returned in the evening, exhausted and irritable, the car piled high with food.

The following morning was full of incident. My presents having been duly inspected and the family thanked, I then went round to the back veranda with Leslie, and there lay a mysterious shape covered with a tarpaulin. Leslie drew this aside with the air of a conjuror, and there lay my boat. I gazed at it rapturously; it was surely the most perfect boat that anyone had ever had.

The boat was some seven feet long, and almost circular in shape. Leslie explained hurriedly that the reason for this was that the planks had been too short for the frame, an explanation I found perfectly satisfactory. After all, it was the sort of irritating thing that could have happened to anyone. I said stoutly that I thought it was a lovely shape for a boat, and indeed I thought it was. She reminded me of an earnest dungbeetle, an insect for which I had great affection. Leslie, pleased at my evident delight, said deprecatingly that he had been forced to make her flat-bottomed, since, for a variety of technical reasons, this was the safest. I said that I liked flat-bottomed boats the best, because it was possible to put jars of specimens on the floor without so much risk of them upsetting. Inside she was painted green and white, while her bulging sides were tastefully covered in white, black, and brilliant orange stripes, a combination of colours that struck me as being both artistic and friendly. Leslie then showed me the long, smooth cypress pole he had cut for a mast, but explained that it could not be fitted into position until the boat was launched. Enthusiastically I suggested launching her at once. Leslie, who was a stickler for procedure, said you couldn't launch a ship without naming her, and had I thought

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of a name yet? This was a difficult problem, and the whole family were called out to help me solve it.

"Why not call it the *Jolly Roger*?" suggested Margo.

I rejected this scornfully; I explained that I wanted a sort of fat name that would go with the boat's appearance and personality.

"*Arbuckle*," suggested Mother vaguely.

That was no use, either; the boat simply didn't look like an Arbuckle.

"Call it the *Ark*," said Leslie, but I shook my head.

There was another silence while we all stared at the boat. Suddenly I had it, the perfect name: *Bootle*, that's what I'd call her.

"Very nice, dear," approved Mother.

"I was just about to suggest the *Bumtrinket*," said Larry.

"Larry, dear!" Mother reproved. "Don't teach the boy things like that."

I turned Larry's suggestion over in my mind; it was certainly an unusual name, but then so was *Bootle*. They both seemed to conjure up the shape and personality of the boat. After much thought I decided what to do. A pot of black paint was produced and laboriously, in rather tricky capitals, I traced her name along the side: THE BOOTLE-BUMTRINKET.

The matter of the name being settled, we set about the task of launching her. It took the combined efforts of Margo, Peter, Leslie, and Larry to carry the boat down the hill to the jetty, while Mother and I followed behind with the mast and a small bottle of wine with which to do the launching properly. At the end of the jetty the boat-bearers stopped, swaying with exhaustion, and Mother and I struggled with the cork of the wine-bottle.

At last we got the cork from the bottle, and I announced in a clear voice that I christened this ship the *Bootle-Bumtrinket*. Then I slapped her rotund backside with the bottle, and they cast the *Bootle-Bumtrinket* off the jetty with a mighty heave.

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She landed on her flat bottom with a report like a cannon, showering sea-water in all directions, and then bobbed steadily and confidently on the ripples.

"Now!" said Leslie, organizing things. "Let's get the mast in. Peter, if you'll get into the stern, Larry and I will hand you the mast . . . all you have to do is stick it in that socket."

Peter leaped nimbly into the stern and settled himself, with legs apart, to receive the mast which Larry and Leslie were holding.

"This mast looks a bit long to me, Les," said Larry, eyeing it critically.

"Nonsense! It'll be fine when it's in," retorted Leslie. "Now . . . are you ready, Peter?"

Peter nodded, braced himself, clasped the mast firmly in both hands, and plunged it into the socket. Then he stood back, dusted his hands, and the *Bootle-Bumtrinket*, with a speed remarkable for a craft of her circumference, turned turtle. Peter, clad in his one decent suit which he had put on in honour of my birthday, disappeared with scarcely a splash. All that remained on the surface of the water was his hat, the mast, and the *Bootle-Bumtrinket's* bright orange bottom.

"He'll drown! He'll drown!" screamed Margo, who always tended to look on the dark side in a crisis.

"Nonsense! It's not deep enough," said Leslie.

"I told you that mast was too long," said Larry unctuously.

"Thank God! He's come up," said Margo in fervent tones as the bedraggled and spluttering Peter rose to the surface.

We hauled him out and Margo hurried him up to the house to try to get his suit dry before the party. The rest of us followed, still arguing. Leslie, incensed at Larry's criticism, changed into trunks and, armed with a massive manual on yacht construction and a tape measure, went down to salvage the boat. For the rest of the morning he kept sawing bits off the mast until she eventually floated upright, but by then the mast was only about three feet high. Leslie was very puzzled, but he promised to fit a new

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mast as soon as he'd worked out the correct specification. So the *Bootle-Bumtrinket*, tied to the end of the jetty, floated there in all her glory, looking like a very vivid, overweight Manx cat.

Spiro arrived soon after lunch, bringing with him a tall, elderly man who had the air of an ambassador. This, Spiro explained, was the King of Greece's ex-butler, who had been prevailed upon to come out of retirement and help with the party.

The first guest to arrive was Theodore, sitting spick and span in a carriage, his best suit on, his boots polished, and, as a concession to the occasion, without any collecting gear. He clasped in one hand a walking-stick, and in the other a neatly tied parcel. "Ah-ha! Many . . . er . . . happy returns of the day," he said, shaking my hand.

On opening the parcel I was delighted to find that it contained a fat volume entitled *Life in Ponds and Streams*.

"I think you will find it a useful . . . um . . . addition to your library," said Theodore, rocking on his toes. "It contains some very interesting information on . . . er . . . *general* freshwater life."

Gradually the guests arrived, and the front of the villa was a surging mass of carriages and taxis. The great drawing-room and dining-room were full of people, talking and arguing and laughing, and the butler, who to Mother's dismay had donned a tail-coat, moved swiftly through the throng like an elderly penguin, serving drinks and food with such a regal air that a lot of the guests were not at all sure if he was a real butler, or merely some eccentric relative we had staying with us.

More and more guests arrived, and with them came presents. Most of these were, from my point of view, useless, as they could not be adapted for natural-history work. The best of the presents were, in my opinion, two puppies brought by a peasant family I knew who lived not far away. One puppy was liver and white with large ginger eyebrows, and the other was coal black with large ginger eyebrows. As they were presents, the family had, of course, to accept them. Larry's suggestion that they be called

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Widdle and Puke was greeted with disgust by Mother, but the names stuck and Widdle and Puke they remained.

Still the guests came, overflowing the drawing-room into the dining-room, and out of the French windows onto the veranda. Some of them had come thinking that they would be bored, and after an hour or so they enjoyed themselves so much that they called their carriages, went home, and reappeared with the rest of their families. In one corner of the room Theodore, having daringly removed his coat, was dancing the Kalamatiano with Leslie and several other of the more exhilarated guests, their feet crashing and shuddering on the floor as they leaped and stamped. The butler, having perhaps taken a little more wine than was good for him, was so carried away by the sight of the national dance that he put his tray down and joined in, leaping and stamping as vigorously as anyone in spite of his age, his coat-tails flapping behind him.

The sea was dawn-calm, and the eastern horizon flushed with pink when we stood yawning at the front door and the last carriage clopped its way down the drive. As I lay in bed with Roger across my feet and a puppy on each side of me, I gazed through the window at the sky, watching the pink spread across the olive top, extinguishing the stars one by one, and thought that, taken all round, it had been an extremely good birthday party.

Very early next morning I packed my collecting gear and some food, and with Roger, Widdle, and Puke as company set off on a voyage in the *Bootle-Bumtrinket*. The sea was calm, the sun was shining out of a gentian-blue sky, and there was just the faintest breeze; it was a perfect day. The *Bootle-Bumtrinket* wallowed up the coast in a slow and dignified manner, while Roger sat in the bows as look-out, and Widdle and Puke ran from one side of the boat to the other, fighting, trying to lean over the side and drink the sea, and generally behaving in a pathetically landlubberish fashion.

Though I spent many days voyaging in the *Bootle-Bumtrinket*,

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and had many adventures, there was nothing to compare with that very first voyage. The sea seemed bluer, more limpid and transparent, the islands seemed more remote, sun-drenched, and enchanting than ever before, and it seemed as though the life of the sea had congregated in the little bays and channels to greet me and my new boat. A hundred feet or so from an islet I shipped the oars and scrambled up to the bows, where I lay side by side with Roger, peering down through a fathom of crystal water at the sea bottom, while the *Bootle-Bumtrinket* floated towards the shore with the placid buoyancy of a celluloid duck.

On the reefs that were only a few inches below the water, and that were uncovered at low tide, you found the thickest congregation of life. In the holes were the pouting blennies, which stared at you with their thick lips. In the shady clefts among the weeds the sea urchins would be gathered in clusters, their spines moving gently like compass needles towards possible danger. Around them the anemones clung to the rocks, plump and lustrous, their arms waving in an effort to catch the shrimps that flipped past. Routing in the dark underwater caverns, I unearthed a baby octopus, who settled on the rocks like a Medusa head, blushed to a muddy brown, and regarded me with rather sad eyes from beneath the bald dome of its head. There were crabs too, waving their claws in what appeared to be a friendly manner, and down below, on the weedy bed of the sea, the spider-crabs with their strange spiky-edged shells.

The sun sank lower, and the water in the bays and below the tottering castles of rock was washed with the slate grey of evening shadow. Slowly, the oars creaking softly to themselves, I rowed the *Bootle-Bumtrinket* homewards. Roger sat staring down into glass jars and tubes in which tiny fish hung suspended, anemones waved their arms, and spider-crabs touched the sides of their glass prisons with delicate claws. Widdle and Puke lay asleep, exhausted by the sun and sea air, their paws twitching, their ginger eyebrows moving as they chased dream crabs across endless reefs.



THE WOODCOCK WINTER

As summer drew to a close I found myself, to my delight, once more without a tutor. Mother had discovered that, as she so delicately put it, Margo and Peter were becoming "*too fond of one another.*" As the family was unanimous in its disapproval of Peter as a prospective relation by marriage, something obviously had to be done. Leslie's only contribution to the problem was to suggest shooting Peter, a plan that was, for some reason, greeted derisively. I thought it was a splendid idea, but I was in the minority. Larry's suggestion that the happy couple should be sent to live in Athens for a month, in order, as he explained, to get it out of their systems, was quashed by Mother on the grounds of immorality. Eventually Mother dispensed with Peter's services, he left hurriedly and furtively, and we had to cope with a tragic, tearful, and wildly indignant Margo, who, dressed in her most flowing and gloomy clothing for the event, played her part magnificently.

Winter came to the island gently as a rule. The sky was still clear, the sea blue and calm, and the sun warm. But there would be an uncertainty in the air. Then one morning you threw back the shutters and looked down over the olive trees, across the blue bay to the russet mountains of the mainland, and became aware that winter had arrived, for each mountain peak would be wearing a tattered skull-cap of snow.

In a few days small white clouds started their winter parade, trooping across the sky, and driving them before it, like an ill-assorted flock of sheep, would come the wind. This was warm at first, and came in gentle gusts. Then there was a lull, a few days' strange calm; suddenly, when you least expected it, the wind would be back. But it was a changed wind, a mad, bellowing wind that leaped down on the island and tried to blow it into

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the sea. The blue sky vanished as a cloak of fine grey cloud was thrown over the island. The sea turned a deep blue, almost black, and became crusted with foam. Rain followed the wind, but it was a warm rain that you could walk in and enjoy, great fat drops that rattled on the shutters, tapped on the vine leaves like drums, and gurgled musically in the gutters.

This was the shooting season. Leslie, of course, was in his element at this time. With a band of fellow enthusiasts he made trips over to the mainland once a fortnight, returning with the great bristly carcass of wild boar, cloaks of blood-stained hares, and huge baskets brimming over with the iridescent carcasses of ducks.

One day, upon his return from such a trip, loaded with game, and puffed up with pride, he explained to us how he had pulled off his first left-and-right. He had to explain in detail, however, before we grasped the full glory of his action. Apparently a left-and-a-right in hunting parlance meant to shoot and kill two birds or animals in quick succession, first with your left barrel and then with your right. He explained how the flock of ducks had come over in the wintry dawn, spread out across the sky. With a shrill whistle of wings they had swept overhead and Leslie had picked out the leader, fired, turned his gun onto the second bird, and fired again with terrific speed, so that when he lowered his smoking barrels the two ducks splashed into the lake almost as one. Gathered in the kitchen, the family listened spellbound to his graphic description.

"Very good, dear," said Mother, when Leslie had described the scene for the fourth time. "It must have been very difficult."

"I don't see why," said Larry.

Leslie, who was just about to describe the whole thing over again, broke off and glared at him. "Oh, you don't?" he asked belligerently. "And what d'you know about it? You couldn't hit an olive tree at three paces, let alone a flying bird."

"My dear fellow, I'm not belittling you," said Larry in his most irritating and unctuous voice. "I just don't see why it is considered so difficult to perform what seems to me a simple task."

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"Simple? If you'd had any experience of shooting you wouldn't call it simple."

"I don't see that it's necessary to have had shooting experience. It seems to me to be merely a matter of keeping a cool head and aiming reasonably straight."

"All right, let's see you pull off a left-and-a-right, then!"

"Certainly. You supply the gun and the victims and I'll show you that it requires no ability whatsoever; it's a question of a mercurial mind that can weigh up the mathematics of the problem."

"Right. We'll go after snipe down in the marsh tomorrow. You can get your mercurial mind to work on those."

"It gives me no pleasure to slaughter birds that have every appearance of having been stunted from birth," said Larry, "but, since my honour is at stake, I suppose they must be sacrificed."

It had rained all night, so early next morning, when we set off to see Larry perform his feat, the ground was moist and squelchy underfoot, and smelled as rich and fragrant as plum-cake. The swamp was really the level floor of a small valley, some ten acres of flat land which were cultivated during the spring and summer months. In the winter it was allowed to run wild, and it became a forest of bamboos and grass, intersected by the brimming irrigation ditches. These ditches that criss-crossed about the swamp made hunting difficult, for most of them were too wide to jump, and you could not wade them, since they consisted of about six feet of liquid mud and four feet of dirty water. They were spanned, here and there, by narrow plank bridges, which were the only means of getting about the swamp. Your time during a hunt was divided between looking for game and looking for the next bridge.

We had hardly crossed the first little bridge when three snipe purred up from under our feet and zoomed away. Larry flung the gun to his shoulder and pulled the triggers excitedly. The hammers fell, but there was no sound.

"It would be an idea to load it," said Leslie.

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"I thought *you'd* done that," Larry said bitterly; "you're acting as the blasted gunbearer, after all. I'd have got that pair if it hadn't been for your inefficiency."

He loaded the gun and we moved slowly on through the bamboos to the head of a tiny bridge that sagged over a wide expanse of placid water. It was then that the accident occurred.

Larry was in the middle of the groaning, shuddering plank when two snipe which had been lying concealed in the long grass at the other end of the bridge rocketed out of the grass and shot skywards. Larry, forgetting in his excitement his rather peculiar situation, shipped the gun to his shoulder and, balancing precariously on the swaying bridge, fired both barrels. The gun roared and kicked, the snipe flew away undamaged, and Larry with a yell of fright fell backwards into the irrigation ditch.

"Hold the gun above your head! Hold it above your head!" roared Leslie.

"Don't stand up or you'll sink," screeched Margo. "Sit still."

But Larry, spreadeagled on his back, had only one idea, and that was to get out as quickly as possible. He sat up and then tried to get to his feet, using, to Leslie's anguish, the gun barrels as a support. He raised himself up, the liquid mud shuddered and boiled, the gun sank out of sight, and Larry disappeared up to his waist.

"Look what you've done to the gun," yelled Leslie furiously; "you've choked the bloody barrels."

"What the hell do you expect me to do?" snarled Larry. "Lie here and be sucked under? Give me a hand, for heaven's sake."

"If you give me the end of the gun I can pull you out, you idiot," shouted Leslie. "I can't reach you otherwise."

Larry groped wildly under the surface for the gun and sank several inches before he retrieved it, clotted with black and evil-smelling mud.

"Dear God! Just *look* at it," moaned Leslie, wiping the mud off it with his handkerchief, "just look at it."

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"Will you stop carrying on over that beastly weapon and get me out of here?" asked Larry vitriolically.

Leslie handed him the ends of the barrels, and we all heaved mightily. At last, after much effort, there came a prolonged belch from the mud and Larry shot to the surface and we hauled him up the bank. He stood there, covered with the black and stinking slush, looking like a chocolate statue that has come in contact with a blast furnace; he appeared to be melting as we watched.

"Are you all right?" asked Margo.

Larry glared at her. "I'm fine," he said sarcastically, "simply fine. Never enjoyed myself more. Apart from a slight touch of pneumonia, a ricked back, and the fact that one of my shoes lies full fathom five, I'm having a wonderful time."

As he limped homewards he poured scorn and wrath on our heads, and by the time we reached home he was convinced that the whole thing had been a plot. As he entered the house, leaving a trail like a ploughed field, Mother uttered a gasp of horror.

"What *have* you been doing, dear?" she asked.

"Doing? What do you think I've been doing? I've been shooting."

"But how did you get like that, dear? You're *sopping*. Did you fall in?"

"Really, Mother, you and Margo have such remarkable perspicacity I sometimes wonder how you survive."

"You must change, dear, or you'll catch cold."

"I can manage," said Larry with dignity; "I've had quite enough attempts on my life for one day."

He refused all offers of assistance, collected a bottle of brandy from the larder, and retired to his room, where a huge fire was laid. He sat muffled up in bed, sneezing and consuming brandy. By lunch-time he sent down for another bottle, and at tea-time we could hear him singing lustily, interspersed with gigantic sneezes. At supper-time Mother began to get worried.

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She sent Margo up to see if Larry was all right. There was a long silence, followed by Larry's voice raised in wrath, and Margo's pleading plaintively. Mother, frowning, stumped upstairs to see what was happening, and Leslie and I followed her.

In Larry's room a fire roared in the grate, and Larry lay concealed under a towering pile of bedclothes. Margo, clasping a glass, stood despairingly by the bed.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Mother, advancing determinedly.

"He's drunk," said Margo despairingly, "and I can't get any sense out of him. I'm trying to get him to take this Epsom salts, otherwise he'll feel awful tomorrow, but he won't touch it. He keeps hiding under the bedclothes and saying I'm trying to poison him."

Mother seized the glass from Margo's hand and strode to the bedside.

"Now come on, Larry, and stop being a fool," she snapped briskly; "drink this down *at once*."

The bedclothes heaved and Larry's tousled head appeared from the depths. He peered blearily at Mother, and blinked thoughtfully to himself. "You're a horrible old woman. . . . I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before," he remarked, and before Mother had recovered from the shock of this observation he had sunk into a deep sleep.

"Well," said Mother, aghast, "he must have had a lot. Anyway, he's asleep now, so let's just build up the fire and leave him. He'll feel better in the morning."

It was Margo who discovered, early the following morning, that a pile of glowing wood from the fire had slipped down between the boards of the room and set fire to the beam underneath. She came flying downstairs in her nightie, pale with emotion, and burst into Mother's room.

"The house is on fire. . . . Get out! Get out!" she yelled dramatically.

Mother leaped out of bed with alacrity. "Wake Gerry . . .

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wake Gerry," she shouted, struggling, for some reason best known to herself, to get her corsets on over her nightie.

"Wake up . . . wake up. . . Fire . . . fire!" screamed Margo at the top of her voice.

Leslie and I tumbled out onto the landing, followed shortly by Mother, looking decidedly eccentric with her corsets done up crookedly over her nightie.

"Larry's on fire? Quick, save him," she screamed, and rushed upstairs to the attic, closely followed by the rest of us. Larry's room was full of acrid smoke, which poured up from between the floorboards. Larry himself lay sleeping peacefully. Mother dashed over to the bed and shook him vigorously.

"Wake up, Larry; for heaven's sake wake up."

"What's the matter?" he asked, sitting up sleepily.

"The room's on fire."

"I'm not surprised," he said, lying down again. "Ask Les to put it out."

"Pour something on it," shouted Les, "get something to pour on it."

Margo, acting on these instructions, seized a half-empty brandy bottle and scattered the contents over a wide area of floor. The flames leaped up and crackled merrily.

"You fool, not brandy!" yelled Leslie; "water . . . get some water."

But Margo, overcome at her contribution to the holocaust, burst into tears. Les, muttering wrathfully, hauled the bedclothes off the recumbent Larry and used them to smother the flames. Larry sat up indignantly.

"What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

"The room's on fire, dear."

"Well, I don't see why I should freeze to death. Why tear all the bedclothes off? Really, the fuss you all make. It's quite simple to put out a fire."

"Oh, shut up," snapped Leslie, jumping up and down on the bedclothes.

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"I've never known people for panicking like you all do," said Larry; "it's simply a matter of keeping your head. Les has the worst of it under control; now if Gerry fetches the hatchet, and you, Mother, and Margo fetch some water, we'll soon have it out."

Eventually, while Larry lay in bed and directed operations, the rest of us managed to rip up the planks and put out the smouldering beam. When, eventually, we started to clean up the mass of smouldering bedclothes, wood splinters, water, and brandy, Larry lay back on the bed with a sigh.

"There you are," he pointed out; "all done without fuss and panic. It's just a matter of keeping your head. I would like someone to bring me a cup of tea, please; I've got the most splitting headache."

"I'm not surprised; you were as tiddled as an owl last night," said Leslie.

"If you can't tell the difference between a high fever due to exposure and a drunken orgy it's hardly fair to besmirch my character," Larry pointed out.

"Well, the fever's left you with a good hangover, anyway," said Margo.

"It's not a hangover," said Larry with dignity, "it's just the strain of being woken up at the crack of dawn by an hysterical pack of people and having to take control of a crisis."

"Fat lot of controlling you did, lying in bed," snorted Leslie.

"It's not the action that counts, it's the brainwork behind it, the quickness of wit, the ability to keep your head when all about you are losing theirs. If it hadn't been for me you would probably all have been burnt in your beds."



CONVERSATION

Spring had arrived and the island was sparkling with flowers. Lambs with flapping tails gambolled under the olives, crushing

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the yellow crocuses under their tiny hooves. Baby donkeys with bulbous and uncertain legs munched among the asphodels. The ponds and streams and ditches were tangled in chains of spotted toad's spawn, the tortoises were heaving aside their winter bed-clothes of leaves and earth, and the first butterflies, winter-faded and frayed, were flitting wanly among the flowers.

In this crisp, heady weather the family spent most of its time on the veranda, eating, sleeping, reading, or just simply arguing. It was here, once a week, that we used to congregate to read our mail which Spiro had brought out to us. The bulk of it consisted of gun catalogues for Leslie, fashion magazines for Margo, and animal journals for myself. Larry's post generally contained books and interminable letters from authors, artists, and musicians, about authors, artists, and musicians. Mother's contained a wedge of mail from various relatives, sprinkled with a few seed catalogues. As we browsed we would frequently pass remarks to one another, or read bits aloud. This was not done with any motive of sociability (for no other member of the family would listen, anyway), but merely because we seemed unable to extract the full flavour of our letters and magazines unless they were shared.

Mother always left until the last a fat letter, addressed in large, firm, well-rounded handwriting, which was the monthly instalment from Great-Aunt Hermione. Her letters invariably created an indignant uproar among the family, so we all put aside our mail and concentrated when Mother, with a sigh of resignation, unfurled the twenty-odd pages, settled herself comfortably, and began to read.

"She says that the doctors don't hold out much hope for her," observed Mother.

"They haven't held out any hope for her for the last forty years and she's still as strong as an ox," said Larry.

"She says she always thought it a little peculiar of us, rushing off to Greece like that, but they've just had a bad winter and she thinks that perhaps it was wise of us to choose such a salubrious climate."

"Salubrious! What a word to use!"

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"Oh, heavens! . . . Oh, no . . . oh, Lord! . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"She says she wants to come and stay . . . the doctors have advised a warm climate!"

"No, I refuse! I couldn't bear it," shouted Larry, leaping to his feet. "You'll have to put her off, Mother . . . tell her there's no room."

"But I can't, dear; I told her in the last letter what a big villa we had."

"She's probably forgotten," said Leslie hopefully.

"She hasn't. She mentions it here . . . where is it? . . . oh, yes, here you are: 'As you now seem able to afford such an extensive establishment, I am sure, Louie dear, that you would not begrudge a small corner to an old woman who has not much longer to live.' There you are! What on earth can we *do*?"

"Write and tell her we've got an epidemic of smallpox raging out here, and send her a photograph of Margo's acne," suggested Larry.

"Don't be silly, dear. Besides, I told her how healthy it is here."

"Really, Mother, you are impossible!" exclaimed Larry angrily. "I was looking forward to a nice quiet summer's work, with just a few select friends, and now we're going to be invaded by that evil old camel, smelling of mothballs and singing hymns in the lavatory."

"Really, dear, you do *exaggerate*. And I don't know why you have to bring lavatories into it—I've never heard her sing hymns anywhere."

"She does nothing else *but* sing hymns . . . 'Lead, Kindly Light,' while everyone queues on the landing."

"Well, anyway, we've got to think of a good excuse. I can't write and tell her we don't want her because she sings hymns."

"Why not?"

"Don't be unreasonable, dear; after all, she *is* a relation."

"What on earth's that got to do with it? Why should we have to

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fawn all over the old hag because she's a relation, when the really sensible thing to do would be to burn her at the stake."

"She's not as bad as that," protested Mother half-heartedly.

"My dear mother, of all the foul relatives with which we are cluttered, she is definitely the worst. Why you keep in touch with her I cannot, for the life of me, imagine."

"Well, I've got to answer her *letters*, haven't I?"

"Why? Just write 'Gone away' across them and send them back."

"I couldn't do that, dear; they'd recognize my handwriting," said Mother vaguely; "besides, I've opened this now."

"Can't one of us write and say you're ill?" suggested Margo.

"Yes, we'll say the doctors have given up hope," said Leslie.

"I'll write the letter," said Larry with relish. "I'll get one of those lovely black-edged envelopes . . . that will add an air of verisimilitude to the whole thing."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Mother firmly. "If you did that she'd come straight out to nurse me. You know what she is."

"Why keep in touch with them? That's what I want to know," asked Larry despairingly. "What satisfaction does it give you? They're all either fossilized or mental."

"Indeed, they're *not* mental," said Mother indignantly.

"Nonsense, Mother. . . . Look at Aunt Bertha, keeping flocks of imaginary cats . . . and there's Great-Uncle Patrick, who wanders about nude and tells complete strangers how he killed whales with a penknife. . . . They're *all* bats."

"Well, they're *queer*; but they're all very old, and so they're bound to be. But they're not *mental*," explained Mother, adding candidly, "Anyway, not enough to be put away."

"Well, if we're going to be invaded by relations, there's only one thing to do," said Larry resignedly.

"What's that?" inquired Mother, peering over her spectacles expectantly.

"We must move, of course."

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"Move? Move where?" asked Mother, bewildered.

"Move to a smaller villa. Then you can write and tell her we haven't any room."

"But don't be stupid, Larry. We can't *keep* moving. We moved here in order to cope with your friends."

"Well, now we'll have to move to cope with the relations."

"But we can't *keep* rushing to and fro about the island. People will think we've gone mad."

"They'll think we're even madder if that old harpy turns up. Honestly, Mother, I couldn't stand it if she came. I should probably borrow one of Leslie's guns and blow a hole in her corsets."

"Larry! I do wish you *wouldn't* say things like that in front of Gerry."

"I'm just warning you."

There was a pause, while Mother polished her spectacles feverishly.

"But it seems so . . . so . . . *eccentric* to keep changing villas like that, dear," she said at last.

"There's nothing eccentric about it," said Larry, surprised; "it's a perfectly logical thing to do."

"Of course it is," agreed Leslie; "it's a sort of self-defence, anyway."

"Do be sensible, Mother," said Margo; "after all, a change is as good as a feast."

So, bearing that novel proverb in mind, we moved.



THE SNOW-WHITE VILLA

Perched on a hill-top among olive trees, the new villa, white as snow, had a broad veranda running along one side, which was hung with a thick pelmet of grape-vine. In front of the house was a pocket-handkerchief-sized garden, neatly walled, which was a solid tangle of wild flowers. The whole garden was over-

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shadowed by a large magnolia tree, the glossy dark green leaves of which cast a deep shadow. The rutted driveway wound away from the house, down the hillside through olive groves, vineyards, and orchids, before reaching the road. We had liked the villa the moment Spiro had shown it to us. It stood, decrepit but immensely elegant, among the drunken olives, and looked rather like an eighteenth-century exquisite reclining among a congregation of charladies. Its charms had been greatly enhanced, from my point of view, by the discovery of a bat in one of the rooms, clinging upside down to a shutter and chittering with dark malevolence. I had hoped that he would continue to spend the day in the house, but as soon as we moved in he decided that the place was getting overcrowded and departed. I regretted his decision, but, having many other things to occupy me, I soon forgot about him.

It was at the white villa that I got on really intimate terms with the mantids; up till then I had seen them, occasionally, prowling through the myrtles, but I had never taken very much notice of them. Now they forced me to take notice of them, for the hill-top on which the villa stood contained hundreds, and most of them were much larger than any I had seen before. They squatted disdainfully on the olives, among the myrtles, on the smooth green magnolia leaves, and at night they would converge on the house, whirring into the lamplight with their green wings churning like the wheels of ancient paddle-steamers, to alight on the tables or chairs and stalk mincingly about, turning their heads from side to side in search of prey, regarding us fixedly from bulbous eyes in chinless faces. These monsters feared nothing, and would, without hesitation, attack something as big as or bigger than themselves. These insects seemed to consider that the house was their property, and the walls and ceilings their legitimate hunting grounds. But the geckos that lived in the cracks in the garden wall also considered the house their hunting ground, and so the mantids and the geckos waged a constant war against each other. Most of the battles were mere skirmishes between individual members of the two forms of animals, but as

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they were generally well matched the fights rarely came to much. Occasionally, however, there would be a battle really worth watching. I was lucky enough to have a grandstand view of such a fight, for it took place above, on, and in my bed.

During the day most of the geckos lived under the loose plaster on the garden wall. As the sun sank and the cool shadow of the magnolia tree enveloped the house and garden they would appear, thrusting their small heads out of the cracks and staring around with their golden eyes. Gradually they slid out into the wall, their flat bodies and stubby, almost conical tails looking ash-grey in the twilight. They would move cautiously across the moss-patched wall until they reached the safety of the vine over the veranda, and there wait patiently until the sky grew dark and the lamps were lit. Then they would choose their hunting areas and make their way to them across the wall of the house, some to the bedrooms, some to the kitchen, while others remained on the veranda among the vine leaves.

There was a particular gecko that had taken over my bedroom as his hunting ground, and I grew to know him quite well and christened him Geronimo, since his assaults on the insect life seemed to me as cunning and well planned as anything that famous Red Indian had achieved. Geronimo seemed to be a cut above the other geckos. To begin with, he lived alone, under a large stone in the zinnia bed beneath my window, and he would not tolerate another gecko anywhere near his home; nor, for that matter, would he allow any strange gecko to enter my bedroom. He rose earlier than the others of his kind, coming out from beneath his stone while the wall and house were still suffused with pale sunset light. He would scuttle up the flaky white plaster precipice until he reached my bedroom window, and poke his head over the sill, peering about curiously and nodding his head rapidly, whether in greeting to me or in satisfaction at finding the room as he had left it, I could never make up my mind. He would sit on the window-sill, gulping to himself, until it got dark and a light was brought in; in the lamp's golden gleam he seemed to change colour, from ash-gray to a pale, translucent pinky-pearl

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that made his neat pattern of goose-pimples stand out, and made his skin look so fine and thin that you felt it should be transparent so that you could see the viscera, coiled neatly as a butterfly's proboscis, in his fat tummy. His eyes glowing with enthusiasm, he would waddle up the wall to his favourite spot, the left-hand outside corner of the ceiling, and hang there upside down, waiting for his evening meal to appear.

The food was not long in arriving. The first shoal of gnats, mosquitoes, and lady-birds, which Geronimo ignored, was very soon followed by the daddy-longlegs, the lacewing flies, the smaller moths, and some of the more robust beetles. Watching Geronimo's stalking tactics was quite an education. A lacewing or a moth, having spun round the lamp until it was dizzy, would flutter up and settle on the ceiling in the white circle of lamp-light printed there. Geronimo, hanging upside down in his corner, would stiffen. He would nod his head two or three times very rapidly, and then start to edge across the ceiling cautiously, millimetre by millimetre, his bright eyes on the insect in a fixed stare. Slowly he would slide over the plaster until he was six inches or so away from his prey, whereupon he stopped for a second and you could see his padded toes moving as he made his grip on the plaster more secure. His eyes would become more protuberant with excitement, what he imagined to be a look of blood-curdling ferocity would spread over his face, the tip of his tail would twitch minutely, and then he would skim across the ceiling as smoothly as a drop of water, there would be a faint snap, and he would turn round, an expression of smug happiness on his face, the lacewing inside his mouth with its legs and wings trailing over his lips like a strange, quivering walrus moustache. He would wag his tail vigorously, like an excited puppy, and then trot back to his resting place to consume his meal in comfort. He had incredibly sharp eyesight, for I frequently saw him spot a minute moth from the other side of the room and circle the ceiling in order to get near enough for the capture.

His attitude towards rivals who tried to usurp his territory was very straightforward. No sooner had they hauled themselves over

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the edge of the sill and settled down for a short rest after the long climb up the side of the villa, than there would be a scuffling noise, and Geronimo would flash across the ceiling and down the wall, to land on the window-sill with a faint thump. Before the newcomer could make a move, Geronimo would rush forward and leap on him. The curious thing was that, unlike the other geckos, he did not attack the head or body of his enemy. He made straight for his opponent's tail, and seizing it in his mouth, about half an inch from the tip, he would hang on like a bulldog and shake it from side to side. The newcomer, unnerved by this dastardly and unusual mode of attack, immediately took refuge in the time-honoured protective device of the lizards: he would drop his tail and scuttle over the edge of the sill and down the wall to the zinnia bed as fast as he could. Geronimo, panting a little from the exertion, would be left standing triumphantly on the sill, his opponent's tail hanging out of his mouth and thrashing to and fro like a snake. Having made sure his rival had departed, Geronimo would then settle down and proceed to eat the tail, a disgusting habit of which I strongly disapproved. However, it was apparently his way of celebrating a victory, and he was not really happy until the tail was safely inside his bulging stomach.

Most of the mantids that flew into my room were fairly small. Geronimo was always eager to tackle them, but they were too quick for him. Unlike the other insects the mantids seemed unaffected by the lamplight; instead of whirling round and round drunkenly, they would calmly settle in a convenient spot and proceed to devour the dancers whenever they settled to regain their strength. Their bulbous eyes seemed just as keen as the gecko's, and they would always spot him and move hurriedly, long before he had crept within fighting range. The night of the great fight, however, he met a mantis that not only refused to fly away, but actually went to meet him.

I had for some time been intrigued by the breeding habits of the mantids. I had watched the unfortunate male crouching on the back of a female who, with complete equanimity, was brows-

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ing on him over her shoulder. Even after his head and thorax had disappeared into the female's neat mouth his hinder end continued to do its duty. Having watched their rather savage love life, I was now very anxious to see the laying and hatching of the eggs. My chance came one day when I was in the hills and I came face to face, as it were, with an exceptionally large female mantis who was stalking regally through the grass. Her belly was distended, and I felt sure that she was expecting a happy event. Having paused, swaying from side to side on her slender legs, and surveyed me coldly, she continued on her way, mincing through the grass-stalks. I decided that the best thing to do would be to capture her so that she could lay her eggs in a box where I could watch over them in comfort. As soon as she realized that I was attempting to capture her, she whirled round and stood up on end, her pale, jade-green wings outspread, her toothed arms curved upwards in a warning gesture of defiance. Amused at her belligerence toward a creature so much bigger than herself, I casually caught her round the thorax between finger and thumb. Instantly her long, sharp arms reached over her back and closed on my thumb, and it felt as though half a dozen needles had been driven through the skin. In my surprise I dropped her and sat back to suck my wound. My respect for her increased; she was obviously an insect to be reckoned with. At the next attempt I was more cautious and used two hands, grabbing her round the thorax with one and holding on to her dangerous front arms with the other. She wiggled ineffectually, and tried to bite me with her jaws, lowering her evil little pointed face and nibbling at my skin, but her jaws were too weak to have any effect. I carried her home and imprisoned her in a large gauze-covered cage in my bedroom, tastefully decorated with ferns, heather, and rocks, among which she moved with light-footed grace. I christened her Cicely, for no obvious reason, and spent a lot of time catching butterflies for her, which she ate in large quantities and with apparently undiminishing appetite, while her stomach got bigger and bigger. Just when I was certain that at any moment she would lay her eggs, she somehow or other found a hole in her cage and escaped.

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I was sitting in bed reading one night when, with a great whirling of wings, Cicely flew across the room and landed heavily on the wall, some ten feet away from where Geronimo was busily cleaning up the last bits of an exceptionally furry moth. He paused with bits of fluff adhering to his lips, and gazed in astonishment at Cicely. He had, I am sure, never seen such a large mantis before, for Cicely was a good half inch longer than he was. Amazed by her size and taken aback by her effrontery at settling in his room, Geronimo could do nothing but stare at her for a few seconds. Meanwhile Cicely turned her head from side to side and looked about with an air of grim interest, like an angular spinster in an art gallery. Recovering from his surprise, Geronimo decided that this impertinent insect would have to be taught a lesson. He wiped his mouth on the ceiling, and then nodded his head rapidly and lashed his tail from side to side, obviously working himself up into a death-defying fury. Cicely took no notice at all, but continued to stare about her, swaying slightly on her long, slender legs. Geronimo slid slowly from the wall, gulping with fury, until about three feet away from the mantis he paused and shifted his feet in turn to make sure that his grip was good. Cicely, with well-simulated astonishment, appeared to notice him for the first time. Without changing her position she turned her head round and peered over her shoulder. Geronimo glared at her and gulped harder. Cicely, having surveyed him coolly with her bulging eyes, continued her inspection of the ceiling as if the gecko did not exist. Geronimo edged forward a few inches, scuffed his toes once more and the tip of his tail twitched. Then he launched himself forward, and a strange thing happened. Cicely, who up till then was apparently absorbed in the inspection of a crack in the plaster, leaped suddenly into the air, turned round, and landed in the same spot, but with her wings spread out like a cloak, reared up on her hind legs, and curved both serviceable forefeet at the ready. Geronimo had not been prepared for this spiky reception, and he skidded to a halt about three inches away and stared at her. She returned his stare with one of scornful belligerence. Geronimo seemed a

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little puzzled by the whole thing; according to his experience the mantis should have taken flight and zoomed away across the room at his approach, and yet here she was standing on end, arms ready to stab, her green cloak of wings rustling gently as she swayed from side to side. However, he could not back out now, so he braced himself and leaped in for the kill.

His speed and weight told, for he crashed into the mantis and made her reel, and grabbed the underside of her thorax in his jaws. Cicely retaliated by snapping both her front legs shut on Geronimo's hind legs. They rustled and staggered across the ceiling and down the wall, each seeking to gain some advantage. Then there was a pause while the contestants had a rest and prepared for the second round, without losing their grips. I wondered whether I ought to interfere; I did not want either of them to get killed, but at the same time the fight was so intriguing that I was loath to separate them. Before I could decide, they started once again.

For some reason or other Cicely was bent on trying to drag Geronimo down the wall to the floor, while he was equally determined that he should drag her up to the ceiling. They lurched to and fro for some time, first one and then the other gaining the upper hand, but nothing decisive really happening. Then Cicely made her fatal mistake; seizing the opportunity during one of their periodic pauses, she hurled herself into the air in what seemed to be an attempt to fly across the room with Geronimo dangling from her claws, like an eagle with a lamb. But she had not taken his weight into consideration. Her sudden leap took the gecko by surprise and tore the suction-pads on his toes free from their grip on the ceiling, but no sooner were they in mid-air than he became a dead weight, and a weight that not even Cicely could cope with. In an intricate tangle of tail and wings they fell onto the bed.

The fall surprised them both so much that they let go of each other, and sat on the blanket regarding each other with blazing eyes. Thinking this was a suitable opportunity to come between them and call it a draw, I was just about to grab the contestants

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when they launched themselves at each other once again. This time Geronimo was wiser and grasped one of Cicely's sharp forearms in his mouth. She retaliated by grabbing him round the neck with the other arm. Both were at an equal disadvantage on the blanket, for their toes and claws got caught in it and tripped them up. They struggled to and fro across the bed, and then started to work their way up towards the pillow. By now they were both looking very much the worse for wear; Cicely had a wing crushed and torn and one leg bent and useless, while Geronimo had a great number of bloody scratches across his back and neck caused by Cicely's front claws.

It looked as though the mantis was tiring, but as her feet made contact with the smooth surface of the sheet it seemed as if she was given a new lease of life. It was a pity that she applied her new-found strength towards the wrong objective. She released her grip on Geronimo's neck and seized his tail instead; whether she thought that by doing so she could hoist him into the air and thus immobilize him, I don't know, but it had the opposite effect. As soon as the claws dug into his tail Geronimo dropped it, but the furious wiggle he gave to accomplish this made his head wag rapidly from side to side, and the result was that he tore Cicely's forearm off in his mouth. So there was Cicely with Geronimo's lashing tail clasped in one claw, while Geronimo, tailless and bloody, had Cicely's left forearm twitching in his mouth. Cicely might still have saved the fight if she had grabbed Geronimo quickly, before he spat out his mouthful of arm; but she was too wrapped up in the thrashing tail, which I think she thought was a vital part of her adversary, and with her one claw she maintained a firm grip on it. Geronimo spat out the forearm and leaped forward, his mouth snapped, and Cicely's head and thorax disappeared into his mouth.

This was really the end of the fight; now it was merely a matter of Geronimo's hanging on until Cicely was dead. Her legs twitched, her wings unfurled like green fans and rustled crisply as they flapped, her great abdomen pulsed, and the movements of her dying body toppled them both into a cleft in the rumpled

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bedclothes. For a long time I could not see them; all I could hear was the faint crackle of the mantis's wings, but presently even this ceased. There was a pause, and then a small, scratched, and blood-stained head poked above the edge of the sheet, and a pair of golden eyes contemplated me triumphantly as Geronimo crawled tiredly into view. A large piece of skin had been torn from his shoulder, leaving a raw, red patch; his back was freckled with beads of blood where the claws had dug into him, and his gory tail-stump left a red smear on the sheet when he moved. He was battered, limp, and exhausted, but victorious. He sat there for some time, gulping to himself, and allowed me to mop his back with a ball of cotton wool on the end of a match-stick. Then, as a prize, I caught five fat flies and gave them to him, and he ate them with enjoyment. Having recovered his strength somewhat, he made his way slowly round the wall, over the window-sill, and down the outside wall of the house to his home under the stone in the zinnia bed. Obviously he had decided that a good night's rest was needed after such a hectic brawl. The following night he was back, perky as ever, wagging his stump of a tail with pleasure as he eyed the feast of insects drifting about the lamp.



THE TALKING FLOWERS

It was not long before I received the unwelcome news that yet another tutor had been found for me. This time it was a certain individual named Kralefsky, a person descended from an intricate tangle of nationalities but predominantly English. The family informed me that he was a very nice man and was, moreover, interested in birds, so we should get on together. I was not, however, the least impressed by this last bit of information; I had met a number of people who professed to be interested in birds, and who had turned out (after careful questioning) to be

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charlatans who did not know what a hoopoe looked like, or could not tell the difference between a black redstart and an ordinary one. I felt certain that the family had invented this bird-loving tutor simply in an effort to make me feel happier about having to start work once again. I was sure that his reputation as an ornithologist would turn out to have grown from the fact that he once kept a canary when he was fourteen.

Kralefsky lived in the top two stories of a square, mildewed old mansion that stood on the outskirts of the town. I climbed the wide staircase and, with disdainful bravado, rapped a sharp tattoo on the knocker that decorated the front door. I waited, glowering to myself and digging the heel of my shoe into the wine-red carpet with considerable violence; presently, just as I was about to knock again, there came the soft pad of footsteps, and the front door was flung wide to reveal my new tutor.

I decided immediately that Kralefsky was not a human being at all, but a gnome who had disguised himself as one by donning an antiquated but very dapper suit. He had a large, egg-shaped head with flattened sides that were tilted back against a smoothly rounded hump-back. This gave him the curious appearance of being permanently in the middle of shrugging his shoulders and peering up into the sky. A long, fine-bridged nose with widely flared nostrils curved out of his face, and his extremely large eyes were liquid and of a pale sherry colour. They had a fixed, far-away look in them, as though their owner were just waking up out of a trance. His wide, thin mouth managed to combine primness with humour, and now it was stretched across his face in a smile of welcome, showing even but discoloured teeth.

"Gerry Durrell?" he asked, bobbing like a courting sparrow, and flapping his large, bony hands at me. "Gerry Durrell, is it not? Come in, my dear boy, do come in."

He beckoned me with a long forefinger, and I walked past him into the dark hall, the floorboards creaking protestingly under their mangy skin of carpet.

"Through here; this is the room we shall work in," fluted Kralefsky, throwing open a door and ushering me into a small,

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sparsely furnished room. I put my books on the table and sat down in the chair he indicated. He leaned over the table, balancing on the tips of his beautifully manicured fingers, and smiled at me in a vague way. I smiled back, not knowing quite what he expected.

"Friends!" he exclaimed rapturously. "It is most *important* that we are friends. I am quite, quite certain we will become friends, aren't you?"

I nodded seriously, biting the inside of my cheeks to prevent myself from smiling.

"Friendship," he murmured, shutting his eyes in ecstasy at the thought, "friendship! That's the ticket!"

His lips moved silently, and I wondered if he was praying, and if so whether it was for me, himself, or both of us. A fly circled his head and then settled confidently on his nose. Kralefsky started, brushed it away, opened his eyes, and blinked at me.

"Yes, yes, that's it," he said firmly; "I'm sure we shall be friends. Your mother tells me that you have a great love of natural history. This, you see, gives us something in common straight away . . . a bond, as it were, eh?"

He inserted a forefinger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket, drew out a large gold watch, and regarded it reproachfully. He sighed, replaced the watch, and then smoothed the bald patch on his head that gleamed like a brown pebble through his licheny hair.

"I am by way of being an aviculturist, albeit an amateur," he volunteered modestly. "I thought perhaps you might care to see my collection. Half an hour or so with the feathered creatures will, I venture to think, do us no harm before we start work. Besides, I was a *little* late this morning, and one or two of them need fresh water."

He led the way up a creaking staircase to the top of the house, and paused in front of a green baize door. He produced an immense bunch of keys that jangled musically as he searched for the right one; he inserted it, twisted it round, and drew open the heavy door. A dazzle of sunlight poured out of the room, blind-

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ing me, and with it came a deafening chorus of bird-song; it was as though Kralfesky had opened the gates of Paradise in the grubby corridor at the top of his house. The attic was vast, stretching away across almost the whole top of the house. It was uncarpeted, and the only piece of furniture was a large deal table in the centre of the room. But the walls were lined, from floor to ceiling, with row upon row of big, airy cages containing dozens of fluttering, chirruping birds. The floor of the room was covered with a fine layer of bird-seed, so that as you walked your feet scrunched pleasantly, as though you were on a shingle beach. Fascinated by this mass of birds I edged slowly round the room, pausing to gaze into each cage, while Kralfesky (who appeared to have forgotten my existence) seized a large watering-can from the table and danced nimbly from cage to cage, filling water-pots.

My first impression, that the birds were all canaries, was quite wrong; to my delight I found there were goldfinches painted like clowns in vivid scarlet, yellow, and black; greenfinches as green and yellow as lemon leaves in midsummer; linnets in their neat chocolate-and-white tweed suiting; bullfinches with bulging, rose-pink breasts; and a host of other birds. In one corner of the room I found small French windows that led me out onto a balcony. At each end a large aviary had been built, and in one lived a cock blackbird, black and velvety with a flaunting, banana-yellow beak; while in the other aviary opposite was a thrushlike bird which was clad in the most gorgeous blue feathering, a celestial combination of shades from navy to opal.

"Rock-thrush," announced Kralfesky, poking his head round the door suddenly and pointing at this beautiful bird; "I had it sent over as a nestling last year . . . from Albania, you know. Unfortunately I have not, as yet, been able to obtain a lady for him."

He waved the watering-can amiably at the thrush, and disappeared inside again. The thrush regarded me with a roguish eye, fluffed his breast out, and gave a series of little clucks that sounded like an amused chuckle. Having gazed long and greed-

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ily at him, I went back into the attic, where I found Kralesky still filling water-pots.

"I wonder if you would care to assist?" he asked, staring at me with vacant eyes, the can drooping in his hand so that a fine stream of water dribbled onto the highly polished toe of one shoe. "A task like this is so much easier if two pairs of hands work at it, I always think. Now, if you hold the watering-can . . . so . . . I will hold out the pots to be filled . . . excellent! That's the ticket! We shall accomplish this in no time at all."

So, while I filled the little earthenware pots with water, Kralesky took them carefully between finger and thumb and inserted them deftly through the cage doors, as though he were popping sweets into a child's mouth. As he worked he talked to both me and the birds with complete impartiality, but as he did not vary his tone at all I was sometimes at a loss to know whether the remark was addressed to me or to one of the occupants of the cages.

"Yes, they're in fine fettle today; it's the sunshine, you know. . . . As soon as it gets to this side of the house they start to sing, don't you? You must lay more next time . . . only two, my dear, only two. You couldn't call *that* a clutch, with all the good will in the world. Do you like this new seed? Do you keep any yourself, eh? There are a number of most interesting seed-eaters found here. . . . Don't do that in your clean water. . . . Breeding some of them is, of course, a task, but a most rewarding one, I find, especially the crosses. I have generally had great success with crosses . . . except when you only lay two, of course . . . rascal, rascal!"

Eventually the watering was done, and Kralesky stood surveying his birds for a moment or so, smiling to himself and wiping his hands carefully on a small towel. Then he led me round the room, pausing before each cage to give me an account of the bird's history, its ancestors, and what he hoped to do with it. We were examining a fat, flushed bullfinch, when suddenly a loud, tremulous ringing sound rose above the clamour of bird-song.

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To my astonishment the noise appeared to emanate from somewhere inside Kralesky's stomach.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed in horror, turning agonized eyes on me, "by Jove!"

He inserted finger and thumb into his waistcoat and drew out his watch. He depressed a tiny lever and the ringing sound ceased. I was a little disappointed that the noise should have such a commonplace source; to have a tutor whose insides chimed at intervals would, I felt, have added greatly to the charm of the lessons. Kralesky peered eagerly at the watch and then screwed up his face in disgust.

"By Jove!" he repeated faintly, "twelve o'clock already . . . winged time indeed. . . . Dear me, and you leave at half-past, don't you?"

He slipped the watch back into its pocket and smoothed his bald patch.

"Well," he said at last, "we cannot, I feel, achieve any scholastic advancement in half an hour. Therefore, if it would pass the time pleasantly for you, I suggest we go into the garden below and pick some groundsel for the birds. It's so good for them, you know, especially when they're laying."

So we went into the garden and picked groundsel until Spiro's car honked its way down the street like a wounded duck.

But I very soon found that Mr. Kralesky was a stickler for work, and he had made up his mind to educate me in spite of any ideas I might have on the subject. The lessons were boring to a degree, for he employed a method of teaching that must have been in fashion round about the middle of the eighteenth century. History was served in great, indigestible chunks, and the dates were learned by heart. We would sit and repeat them in a monotonous, sing-song chorus, until they became like some incantation that we chanted automatically, our minds busy with other things.

I had worked for some weeks with Kralesky before I discovered that he did not live alone. At intervals during the morning he would pause suddenly, in the middle of a sum or a recitation

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of county towns, and cock his head on one side, as if listening.

"Excuse me a moment," he would say. "I must go and see Mother."

At first this rather puzzled me, for I was convinced that Kralfesky was far too old to have a mother still living. After considerable thought, I came to the conclusion that this was merely his polite way of saying that he wished to retire to the lavatory, for I realized that not everyone shared my family's lack of embarrassment when discussing this topic. It never occurred to me that, if this was so, Kralfesky closeted himself more often than any other human being I had met. One morning I had consumed for breakfast a large quantity of loquats, and they had distressing effects on me when we were in the middle of a history lesson. Since Kralfesky was so finicky about the subject of lavatories I decided that I would have to phrase my request politely, so I thought it best to adopt his own curious term. I looked him firmly in the eye and said that I would like to pay a visit to his mother.

"My mother?" he repeated in astonishment. "Visit my mother? Now?"

I could not see what the fuss was about, so I merely nodded.

"Well," he said doubtfully, "I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you, of course, but I'd better just go and see if it's convenient."

He left the room, still looking a trifle puzzled, and returned after a few minutes.

"Mother would be delighted to see you," he announced, "but she says will you please excuse her being a little untidy?"

I thought it was carrying politeness to an extreme to talk about the lavatory as if it were a human being, but, since Kralfesky was obviously a bit eccentric on the subject, I felt I had better humour him. I said I did not mind a bit if his mother was in a mess, as ours frequently was as well.

"Ah . . . er . . . yes, yes, I expect so," he murmured, giving me rather a startled glance. He led me down the corridor, opened a door, and, to my complete surprise, ushered me into a large

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shadowy bedroom. The room was a forest of flowers; vases, bowls, and pots were perched everywhere, and each contained a mass of beautiful blooms that shone in the gloom like walls of jewels in a green-shadowed cave. At one end of the room was an enormous bed, and in it, propped up on a heap of pillows, lay a tiny figure not much bigger than a child. She must have been very old, I decided as we drew nearer, for her fine, delicate features were covered with a network of wrinkles that grooved a skin as soft and velvety-looking as a baby mushroom's. But the astonishing thing about her was her hair. It fell over her shoulders in a thick cascade, and then spread half-way down the bed. It was the richest and most beautiful auburn colour imaginable, glinting and shining as though on fire, making me think of autumn leaves and the brilliant winter coat of a fox.

"Mother dear," Kralefsky called softly, bobbing across the room and seating himself on a chair by the bed, "Mother dear, here's Gerry come to see you."

The minute figure on the bed lifted thin, pale lids and looked at me with great tawny eyes that were as bright and intelligent as a bird's. She lifted a slender, beautifully shaped hand, weighed down with rings, from the depths of the auburn tresses and held it out to me, smiling mischievously.

"I am so very flattered that you asked to see me," she said in a soft, husky voice. "So many people nowadays consider a person of my age a bore."

Embarrassed, I muttered something, and the bright eyes looked at me, twinkling, and she gave a fluting blackbird laugh, and patted the bed with her hand.

"Do sit down," she invited; "do sit down and talk for a minute."

Gingerly I picked up the mass of auburn hair and moved it to one side so that I could sit on the bed. The hair was soft, silky, and heavy, like a flame-coloured wave swishing through my fingers. Mrs. Kralefsky lifted a strand of it in her fingers, twisting it gently so that it sparkled.

"My one remaining vanity," she said.

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She gazed down at the flood of hair as though it were a pet, or some other creature that had nothing to do with her, and patted it affectionately.

"It's strange," she said, "very strange. I have a theory, you know, that some beautiful things fall in love with themselves, as Narcissus did. When they do that, they need no help in order to live; they become so absorbed in their own beauty that they live for that alone, feeding on themselves, as it were. Thus, the more beautiful they become, the stronger they become; they live in a circle. That's what my hair has done. It is self-sufficient, it grows only for itself, and the fact that my old body has fallen to ruin does not affect it a bit. When I die they will be able to pack my coffin deep with it, and it will probably go on growing after my body is dust."

"Now, now, Mother, you shouldn't talk like that," Kralefsky chided her gently. "I don't like these morbid thoughts."

She turned her head and regarded him affectionately, chuckling softly.

"But it's not morbid, John; it's only a theory I have," she explained. "Besides, think what a beautiful shroud it will make."

She gazed down at her hair, smiling happily. In the silence Kralefsky's watch chimed eagerly, and he started, pulled it out of his pocket and stared at it.

"By Jove!" he said, jumping to his feet, "those eggs should have hatched. Excuse me a minute, will you, Mother? I really must go and see."

"Run along, run along," she said. "Gerry and I will chat until you come back . . . don't worry about us."

"That's the ticket!" exclaimed Kralefsky, and bobbed rapidly across the room between the banks of flowers, like a mole burrowing through a rainbow. The door sighed shut behind him, and Mrs. Kralefsky turned her head and smiled at me.

"They say," she announced—they say that when you get old, as I am, your body slows down. I don't believe it. No, I think that is quite wrong. I have a theory that you do *not* slow down at all, but that *life slows down for you*. You understand me?

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Everything becomes languid, as it were, and you can notice so much more when things are in slow motion. The things you see! The extraordinary things that happen all around you, that you never even suspected before! It is really a delightful adventure, quite delightful!"

She sighed with satisfaction, and glanced round the room.

"Take flowers," she said, pointing at the blooms that filled the room. "Have you heard flowers *talking*?"

Greatly intrigued, I shook my head; the idea of flowers talking was quite new to me.

"Well, I can assure you that they *do* talk," she said. "They hold long conversations with each other . . . at least I presume them to be conversations, for I don't understand what they're saying, naturally. When you're as old as I am you'll probably be able to hear them as well; that is, if you retain an open mind about such matters. *Most* people say that as one gets older one believes nothing and is surprised at nothing, so that one becomes more receptive to ideas. Nonsense! All the old people I know have had their minds locked up like grey, scaly oysters since they were in their teens."

She glanced at me sharply.

"D'you think I'm queer? Touched, eh? Talking about flowers holding conversations?"

Hastily and truthfully I denied this. I said that I thought it was more than likely that flowers conversed with each other. I pointed out that bats produced minute squeaks which I was able to hear, but which would be inaudible to an elderly person, since the sound was too high-pitched.

"That's it, that's it!" she exclaimed delightedly. "It's a question of wave-length. I put it all down to this slowing-up process. Another thing that you don't notice when you're young is that flowers have personality. They are different from each other, just as people are. Look, I'll show you. D'you see that rose over there, in the bowl by itself?"

On a small table in the corner, enshrined in a small silver bowl, was a magnificent velvety rose, so deep a garnet red that it was

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almost black. It was a gorgeous flower, the petals curled to perfection, the bloom on them as soft and unblemished as the down on a newly hatched butterfly's wing.

"Isn't he a beauty?" inquired Mrs. Kralesky. "Isn't he wonderful? Now, I've had him two weeks. You'd hardly believe it, would you? And he was not a bud when he came. No, no, he was fully open. But, do you know, he was so sick that I did not think he would live? The person who plucked him was careless enough to put him in with a bunch of Michaelmas daisies. Fatal, absolutely fatal! You have no idea how cruel the daisy family is, on the whole. They are very rough-and-ready sort of flowers, very down to earth, and, of course, to put such an aristocrat as a rose amongst them is just *asking* for trouble. By the time he got here he had drooped and faded to such an extent that I did not even notice him among the daisies. But, luckily, I heard them at it. I was dozing here when they started, particularly, it seemed to me, the yellow ones, who always seem so belligerent. Well, of course, I didn't know what they were saying, but it sounded *horrible*. I couldn't think *who* they were talking to at first; I thought they were quarrelling among themselves. Then I got out of bed to have a look and I found that poor rose, crushed in the middle of them, being harried to death. I got him out and put him by himself and gave him half an aspirin. Aspirin is so good for roses. Drachma pieces for the chrysanthemums, aspirin for roses, brandy for sweet peas, and a squeeze of lemon-juice for the fleshy flowers, like begonias. Well, removed from the company of the daisies and given that pick-me-up, he revived in no time, and he seems so grateful; he's obviously making an effort to remain beautiful for as long as possible in order to thank me."

She gazed at the rose affectionately, as it glowed in its silver bowl.

"Yes, there's a lot I have learned about flowers. They're just like people. Put too many together and they get on each other's nerves and start to wilt. Mix some kinds and you get what appears to be a dreadful form of class distinction. And, of course,

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the water is so important. Do you know that some people think it's kind to change the water every day? Dreadful! You can *hear* the flowers dying if you do that. I change the water once a week, put a handful of earth in it, and they thrive."

The door opened and Kralefsky came bobbing in, smiling triumphantly.

"They've all hatched!" he announced, "all four of them. I'm so glad. I was quite worried, as it's her first clutch."

"Good, dear; I'm so glad," said Mrs. Kralefsky delightedly. "That is nice for you. Well, Gerry and I have been having a most interesting conversation. At least, I found it interesting, anyway."

Getting to my feet, I said that I had found it most interesting as well.

"You must come and see me again, if it would not bore you," she said. "You will find my ideas a little eccentric, I think, but they are worth listening to."

She smiled up at me, lying on the bed under her great cloak of hair, and lifted a hand in a courteous gesture of dismissal. I followed Kralefsky across the room, and at the door I looked back and smiled. She was lying quite still, submissive under the weight of her hair. She lifted her hand again and waved. It seemed to me, in the gloom, that the flowers had moved closer to her, had crowded eagerly about her bed, as though waiting for her to tell them something. A ravaged old queen, lying in state, surrounded by her whispering court of flowers.



DODO

Strangely enough it was due to Mother that Dodo made her appearance among us. Dodo was a curious breed of dog known as a Dandy Dinmont. They look like long, fat, hair-covered balloons, with minute bow legs, enormous and protuberant eyes,

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and long flopping ears. A friend of ours had a pair of these beasts which had produced a litter of six puppies. The poor man was at his wits' end trying to find good homes for all these offspring, and so Mother, good-naturedly and unthinkingly, said she would have one. She set off one afternoon to choose her puppy and, rather unwisely, selected a female. At the time it did not strike her as impudent to introduce a bitch into a household exclusively populated by very masculine dogs. So, clasp- ing the puppy, like a dimly conscious sausage, under one arm, Mother climbed into the car and drove home in triumph to show the new addition to the family.

"Oh, isn't he sweet?" cried Margo.

"Good God! It looks like a sea-slug," said Leslie.

"Mother! Really!" said Larry, contemplating Dodo with loathing. "Where did you dig up that canine Frankenstein?"

"Oh, but he's *sweet*," repeated Margo. "What's wrong with him?"

"It's not a him, it's a her," said Mother, regarding her acquisition proudly; "she's called Dodo."

"Well, that's two things wrong with it for a start," said Larry. "It's ghastly name for an animal, and to introduce a bitch into the house with those other three lechers about is asking for trouble. Apart from that, just look at it! Look at the shape! How did it get like that? Did it have an accident, or was it born like that?"

"Don't be silly, dear; it's the breed. They're *meant* to be like that."

So Dodo settled in. We soon discovered that Dodo had an extremely limited intelligence. There was only room for one idea at a time in her skull, and once it was there Dodo would retain it grimly in spite of all opposition. She decided quite early in her career that Mother belonged to her, but she was not over-possessive at first until one afternoon Mother went off to town to do some shopping and left Dodo behind. Convinced that she would never see Mother again, Dodo went into mourning, howling sorrowfully. She greeted Mother's return with incredulous joy,

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but made up her mind that from that moment she would not let Mother out of her sight, for fear she might escape again. So she attached herself to Mother with the tenacity of a limpet, never moving more than a couple of feet away at the most. If Mother sat down, Dodo would lie at her feet; if Mother had to get up and cross the room for a book or a cigarette, Dodo would accompany her, and then they would return together and sit down again, Dodo giving a deep sigh of satisfaction at the thought that once more she had foiled Mother's attempts at escape.

At first Dodo was regarded with tolerant scorn by Roger, Widdle, and Puke. They were inclined to consider her a boring and useless addition to the household, until they discovered that she had one superlative and overwhelming delightful characteristic: she came into season with monotonous regularity. Dodo herself displayed an innocence about the facts of life that was rather touching. She seemed not only puzzled but positively scared at her sudden bursts of popularity, when her admirers arrived in such numbers that Mother had to go about armed with a massive stick. It was owing to this Victorian innocence that Dodo fell an easy victim to the lure of Puke's magnificent ginger eyebrows, and so met a fate worse than death when Mother inadvertently locked them in the drawing-room together one day while she supervised the making of tea.

To everyone's surprise (including Dodo's) a puppy was born of this union, a strange, mewling blob of a creature with its mother's figure and its father's unusual liver-and-white markings. To suddenly become a mother like that, Dodo found, was very demoralizing, and she almost had a nervous breakdown, for she was torn between the desire to stay in one spot with her puppy and the urge to keep as close to Mother as possible. We were, however, unaware of this psychological turmoil. Eventually Dodo decided to compromise, so she followed Mother around and carried the puppy in her mouth. She had spent a whole morning doing this before we discovered what she was up to; the unfortunate baby hung from her mouth by its head, its body swinging to and fro as Dodo waddled along at Mother's

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heels. Scolding and pleading having no effect, Mother was forced to confine herself to the bedroom with Dodo and her puppy, and we carried their meals up on a tray.

"If this goes on much longer that puppy'll grow into a giraffe," observed Leslie.

"I know, poor little thing," said Mother; "but what can I do? She picks it up if she sees me lighting a cigarette."

"Simplest thing would be to drown it," said Larry. "It's going to grow into the most horrifying animal, anyway. Look at its parents."

"No, indeed you won't drown it!" exclaimed Mother indignantly.

"Well, I think it's a perfectly ridiculous situation, allowing yourself to be chained to a chair by a dog."

"It's my dog, and if I want to sit here I *shall*," said Mother firmly.

"But for how long? This might go on for months."

"I shall think of something," said Mother with dignity.

The solution to the problem that Mother eventually thought of was simple. She hired a young peasant girl to carry the puppy for Dodo. This arrangement seemed to satisfy Dodo very well, and once more Mother was able to move about the house. She pattered from room to room like some Eastern potentate, Dodo pattering at her heels, and young Sophia bringing up the end of the line, bearing in her arms a large cushion on which reposed Dodo's strange offspring. When Mother was going to be in one spot for any length of time Sophia would place the cushion reverently on the ground, and Dodo would surge onto it and sigh deeply. As soon as Mother was ready to go to another part of the house, Dodo would get off her cushion, shake herself, and take up her position in the cavalcade, while Sophia lifted the cushion aloft as though it carried a crown. Mother would peer over her spectacles to make sure the column was ready, give a little nod, and they would wind their way off to the next job.

Every evening Mother would go for a walk with the dogs, and

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the family would derive much amusement from watching her progress down the hill. Roger, as senior dog, would lead the procession, followed by Widdle and Puke. Then came Mother, wearing an enormous straw hat, which made her look like an animated mushroom. Dodo would waddle behind, eyes protruding and tongue flapping, and Sophia would bring up the rear, pacing along solemnly, carrying the imperial puppy on its cushion. Mother's circus, Larry called it, and would irritate her by bellowing out of the window, "Oi! Lady, wot time does the big top go up, hay?"

He purchased a bottle of hair restorer for her so that, as he explained, she could conduct experiments on Sophia and try to turn her into a bearded lady. "That's wot your show *needs*, lady," he assured her in a hoarse voice—"a bit of clarse, see? Nothing like a bearded lady for bringin' a bit o' clarse to a show."

But in spite of all this Mother continued to lead her strange caravan off into the olive groves at five o'clock every evening.



THE CHESSBOARD FIELDS

Below the villa, between the line of hills on which it stood and the sea, were the Chessboard Fields. The sea curved into the coast in a great, shallow bay, and on the flat land along its edges lay the intricate pattern of narrow waterways that had once been salt pans in the Venetian days. Each neat little patch of earth, framed with canals, was richly cultivated and green with crops of maize, potatoes, figs, and grapes. These fields, small coloured squares edged with shining waters, lay like a sprawling, multicoloured chessboard on which the peasants' coloured figures moved from place to place.

This was one of my favourite areas for hunting in, for the tiny waterways and the lush undergrowth harboured a multitude

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of creatures. One afternoon, having nothing better to do, I decided to take the dogs and visit the fields. I would make yet another attempt to catch Old Plop, cut across to the sea for a feed of cockles and a swim, and make my way home. Old Plop was a large and ancient terrapin that lived in one of the canals. I had been trying to capture him for a month or more, but in spite of his age he was very wily and quick, and no matter how cautiously I stalked him when he lay asleep on the muddy bank, he would always wake up at the crucial moment, his legs would flail frantically, and he would slide down the mud slope and plop into the water. I was determined to possess him, and as I had left him alone for a whole week I thought it was high time to launch another attack.

With my bag of bottles and boxes, my net, and a basket to put Old Plop in should I catch him, I set off down the hill with the dogs. We followed the edge of the canal towards the place where Old Plop had his favourite mud slide. As we were drawing near to this spot, I was just about to caution the dogs on the need for absolute silence when a large green lizard flashed out of a wheat-patch and scuttled away. The dogs, barking wildly, galloped in eager pursuit. By the time I reached Old Plop's mud slide there was only a series of gently expanding ripples on the water to tell me that he had been present. I sat down and waited for the dogs to rejoin me, running through in my mind the rich and colourful insults with which I would bombard them. But to my surprise they did not come back. Their yelping in the distance died away, there was a pause, and then they started to bark in a chorus—monotonous, evenly spaced barks that meant they had found something. Wondering what it could be I hurried after them.

They were clustered in a half-circle round a clump of grass at the water's edge, and came gambolling to meet me, tails thrashing, whining with excitement. At first I could not see what it was they were so excited over; then what I had taken to be a root-let moved, and I was looking at a pair of fat brown water-snakes, coiled passionately together in the grass. This was a



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thrilling find, and one that almost compensated for the loss of Old Plop. I had long wanted to catch one of these snakes, but they were such fast and skilful swimmers that I had never succeeded in getting close enough to accomplish a capture. Now the dogs had found this fine pair, lying in the sun—there for the taking, as it were.

The dogs, having done their duty by finding these creatures and leading me to them, now retreated to a safe distance (for they did not trust reptiles) and sat watching me interestedly. Slowly I manœuvred my butterfly net round until I could unscrew the handle; having done this, I had a stick with which to do the catching, but the problem was *how* to catch two snakes with one stick? While I was working this out, one of them decided the thing for me, uncoiling himself unhurriedly and sliding into the water as cleanly as a knife-blade. Thinking that I had lost him, I watched irritably as his undulating length merged with the water reflection. Then, to my delight, I saw a column of mud rise slowly through the water and expand like a rose on the surface; the reptile had buried himself at the bottom, and I knew he would stay there until he thought I had gone. I turned my attention to his mate, pressing her down in the lush grass with the stick; she twisted herself into a complicated knot, and, opening her pink mouth, hissed at me. I grabbed her firmly round the neck between finger and thumb, and she hung limp in my hand while I stroked her handsome white belly. I put her tenderly into the basket, and then prepared to capture the other one.

I took off my sandals and lowered myself into the warm water, feeling the liquid mud squeeze up between my toes and stroke up my legs, as soft as ashes. I made my way towards the spot where my quarry lay hidden, moving my feet slowly and carefully in the shifting curtain of mud. Suddenly, under my foot, I felt the slithering body, and I plunged my arms elbow-deep into the water and grabbed. My fingers closed only on mud which oozed between them and drifted away in turbulent, slow-motion clouds. I was just cursing my ill-luck when the snake shot to the

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surface a yard away from me, and started to swim sinuously along the surface. With a yell of triumph I flung myself full length on top of him.

There was a confused moment as I sank beneath the dark waters and the silt boiled up into my eyes, ears, and mouth, but I could feel the reptile's body thrashing wildly to and fro, firmly clasped in my left hand, and I glowed with triumph. Gasping and spluttering under my layer of mud, I sat up in the canal and grabbed the snake round the neck before he could recover his wits and bite me; then I spat for a long time, to rid my teeth and lips of the fine, gritty layer which coated them. When I at last rose to my feet and turned to wade ashore I found to my surprise that my audience of dogs had been enlarged by the silent arrival of a man, who was squatting comfortably on his haunches and watching me with a mixture of interest and amusement.

He was a short, stocky individual whose brown face was topped by a thatch of close-cropped fair hair, the colour of tobacco. I did not recognize him, and supposed him to be a fisherman from some village farther down the coast. He regarded me gravely as I scrambled up the bank, and then smiled.

"Your health," he said in a rich, deep voice.

I returned his greeting politely, and then busied myself with the job of trying to get the second snake into the basket without letting the first one escape. I expected him to deliver a lecture to me on the deadliness of the harmless water-snakes and the dangers I ran by handling them, but to my surprise he remained silent, watching with interest while I pushed the writhing reptile into the basket.

"You are a stranger?" he asked, inhaling deeply on a cigarette he had just finished rolling.

I said that I was English, and that I and my family lived in a villa up in the hills. Then I waited for the inevitable questions as to the sex, number, and age of my family, their work and aspirations, followed by a skilful cross-examination as to why we lived in Corfu. This was the usual peasant way; it was not done

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unpleasantly, nor with any motive other than friendly interest. They would vouchsafe their own private business to you with great simplicity and frankness, and would be hurt if you did not do the same. But, to my surprise, the man seemed satisfied with my answer, and asked nothing further.

I decided that I would have to go down to the sea and wash both myself and my clothes before returning home. I got to my feet and shouldered my bag and nets; the dogs got to their feet, shook themselves, and yawned. More out of politeness than anything, I asked the man where he was going. It was, after all, peasant etiquette to ask questions.

"I'm going down to the sea," he said, gesturing with his cigarette—"down to my boat. . . . Where are you going?"

I said I was making for the sea too, first to wash and secondly to find some cockles to eat.

"I will walk with you," he said, rising and stretching. "I have a basketful of cockles in my boat; you may have some of those if you like."

We walked through the fields in silence, and when we came out onto the sands he pointed at the distant shape of a rowing-boat. As we walked towards her I asked if he was a fisherman, and if so, where he came from.

"I come from here . . . from the hills," he replied. "At least, my home is here, but I am now at Vido."

The reply puzzled me, for Vido was a tiny islet lying off the town of Corfu, and as far as I knew it had no one on it at all except convicts and warders, for it was the local prison island. I pointed this out to him.

"That's right," he agreed, stooping to pat Roger as he ambled past, "that's right. I'm a convict."

I thought he was joking, and glanced at him sharply, but his expression was quite serious. I said I presumed he had just been let out.

"No, no, worse luck," he smiled. "I have another two years to do. But I'm a good prisoner, you see. Any like me, those they feel they can trust, are allowed to make boats and sail home for

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the week-end, if it's not too far. I've got to be back there first thing Monday morning."

Once the thing was explained, of course, it was simple. It never even occurred to me that the procedure was unusual. I knew one wasn't allowed home for week-ends from an English prison, but this was Corfu, and in Corfu anything could happen. I was bursting with curiosity to know what his crime had been, and I was just phrasing a tactful inquiry in my mind when we reached the boat, and inside it was something that drove all other thoughts from my head. In the stern, tethered to the seat by one yellow leg, sat an immense black-backed gull, who contemplated me with sneering yellow eyes. I stepped forward eagerly and stretched out my hand to the broad, dark back.

"Be careful . . . watch out; he is a bully, that one!" said the man urgently.

His warning came too late, for I had already placed my hand on the bird's back and was gently running my fingers over the silken feathering. The gull crouched, opened his beak slightly, and the dark iris of his eye contracted with surprise, but he was so taken aback by my audacity that he did nothing.

"Spiridion!" said the man in amazement, "he must like you; he's never let anyone else touch him without biting."

I buried my fingers in the crisp white feathers on the bird's neck, and as I scratched gently the gull's head drooped forwards and his yellow eyes became dreamy. I asked the man where he had managed to catch such a magnificent bird.

"I sailed over to Albania in the spring to try to get some hares, and I found him in a nest. He was small then, and fluffy as a lamb. Now he's like a great duck," the man said, staring pensively at the gull. "Fat duck, ugly duck, biting duck, aren't you, eh?"

The gull at being thus addressed opened one eye and gave a short, harsh yarp, which may have been repudiation or agreement. The man leaned down and pulled a big basket from under the seat; it was full to the brim with great fat cockles that chinked musically. We sat in the boat and ate the shellfish, and all the

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time I watched the bird, fascinated by the snow-white breast and head, his long hooked beak and fierce eyes, as yellow as spring crocuses, the broad back and powerful wings, sooty black. From the soles of his great webbed feet to the tip of his beak he was, in my opinion, quite admirable. I swallowed a final cockle, wiped my hands on the side of the boat, and asked the man if he could get a baby gull for me the following spring.

"You want one?" he said in surprise; "you like them?"

I felt this was understating my feelings. I would have sold my soul for such a gull.

"Well, have him if you want him," said the man casually, jerking a thumb at the bird.

I could hardly believe my ears. For someone to possess such a wonderful creature and to offer him as a gift so carelessly was incredible. Didn't he *want* the bird, I asked?

"Yes, I like him," said the man, looking at the bird meditatively, "but he eats more than I can catch for him, and he is such a wicked one that he bites everybody; none of the other prisoners or the warders like him. I've tried letting him go, but he *won't* go—he keeps coming back. I was going to take him over to Albania one week-end and leave him there. So if you're sure you want him you can have him."

Sure I wanted him? It was like being offered an angel. A slightly sardonic-looking angel, it's true, but one with the most magnificent wings. In my excitement I never even stopped to wonder how the family would greet the arrival of a bird the size of a goose with a beak like a razor. In case the man changed his mind I hastily took off my clothes, beat as much of the dried mud off them as possible, and had a quick swim in the shallows. I put on my clothes again, whistled the dogs, and prepared to carry my prize home. The man untied the string, lifted the gull up, and handed him to me; I clasped it under one arm, surprised that such a huge bird should be so feather-light. I thanked the man profusely for his wonderful present.

"He knows his name," he remarked, clasping the gull's beak

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between his fingers and wagging it gently. "I call him Alecko. He'll come when you call."

Alecko, on hearing his name, paddled his feet wildly and looked up into my face with questioning yellow eyes.

"You'll be wanting some fish for him," remarked the man. "I'm going out in the boat tomorrow, about eight. If you like to come we can catch a good lot for him."

I said that would be fine, and Alecko gave a yarp of agreement. The man leaned against the bows of the boat to push it out, and I suddenly remembered something. As casually as I could I asked him what his name was, and why he was in prison. He smiled charmingly over his shoulder.

"My name's Kosti," he said, "Kosti Panopoulos. I killed my wife."

He leaned against the bows of the boat and heaved; she slid whispering across the sand and into the water. Kosti scrambled into the boat and took up the oars.

"Your health," he called. "Until tomorrow."

The oars creaked musically, and the boat skimmed rapidly over the limpid waters. I turned, clasping my precious bird under my arm, and started to trudge back over the sand.

"Where did you get him, anyway?" Leslie asked me when I arrived home.

I explained about my meeting with Kosti and how he had given me the bird.

"Nobody in their right senses would give somebody a present like that," observed Larry. "Who is this man, anyway?"

Without thinking, I said he was a convict.

"A convict?" quavered Mother. "What d'you mean, a convict?"

I explained about Kosti's being allowed home for the week-ends, because he was a trusted member of the Vido community. I added that he and I were going fishing the next morning.

"I don't know whether it's very wise, dear," Mother said

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doubtfully. "I don't like the idea of your going about with a convict. You never know what he's done."

Indignantly, I said I knew perfectly well what he'd done. He killed his wife.

"A murderer?" said Mother, aghast. "But what's he doing wandering round the countryside? Why didn't they hang him?"

"They don't have the death penalty here for anything except bandits," explained Leslie; "you get three years for murder and five years if you're caught dynamiting fish."

"Ridiculous!" said Mother indignantly. "I've never heard of anything so scandalous. Anyway, I won't have you wandering around with a murderer. He might cut your throat or something."

After an hour's arguing and pleading I finally got Mother to agree that I should go fishing with Kosti, providing that Leslie came down and had a look at him first. So the next morning I went fishing with Kosti, and when we returned with enough food to keep Alecko occupied for a couple of days, I asked my friend to come up to the villa, so that Mother could inspect him for herself.

Mother had, after considerable mental effort, managed to commit to memory two or three Greek words. This lack of vocabulary had a restrictive effect on her conversation at the best of times, but when she was faced with the ordeal of exchanging small talk with a murderer she promptly forgot all the Greek she knew. So she had to sit on the veranda, smiling nervously, while Kosti in his faded shirt and tattered pants drank a glass of beer, and while I translated his conversation.

"He seems such a *nice* man," Mother said, when Kosti had taken his leave; "he doesn't look a bit like a murderer."

"What did you think a murderer looked like?" asked Larry—"someone with a hare lip and a club foot, clutching a bottle marked 'Poison' in one hand?"

"Don't be silly, dear; of course not. But I thought he'd look . . . well, you know, a little more murderous."

"You simply can't judge by physical appearance," Larry

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pointed out; "you can only tell by a person's actions. I could have told you he was a murderer at once."

"How, dear?" asked Mother, very intrigued.

"Elementary," said Larry with a deprecating sigh. "No one but a murderer would have thought of giving Gerry that albatross."



AN ENTERTAINMENT WITH ANIMALS

The house was humming with activity. Groups of peasants, loaded with baskets of produce and bunches of squawking hens, clustered round the back door. Spiro arrived twice, and sometimes three times, a day, the car piled high with crates of wine, chairs, trestle tables, and boxes of foodstuffs. In the dining-room Margo lay on the floor, surrounded by huge sheets of brown paper on which she was drawing large and highly colored murals in chalk; in the drawing-room Leslie was surrounded by huge piles of furniture, and was mathematically working out the number of chairs and tables the house could contain without becoming uninhabitable; in the kitchen Mother (assisted by two shrill peasant girls) moved in an atmosphere like the interior of a volcano, surrounded by clouds of steam, sparkling fires, and the soft bubbling of pots; the dogs and I wandered from room to room helping where we could, giving advice and generally making ourselves useful; upstairs in his bedroom Larry slept peacefully. The family was preparing for a party.

As always, we had decided to give the party at a moment's notice, and for no other reason than that we suddenly felt like it. Overflowing with the milk of human kindness, the family had invited everyone they could think of, including people they cordially disliked. Everyone threw themselves into the preparations with enthusiasm. Since it was early September we decided to call it a Christmas party, and, in order that the whole thing should

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not be too straightforward, we invited our guests to lunch, as well as to tea and dinner. This meant the preparation of a vast quantity of food, and Mother disappeared into the kitchen and stayed there for hours at a time.

As usual, on the rare occasions when the family were unanimous in their desire to entertain, they started organizing so far in advance, and with such zest, that by the time the day of the festivities dawned they were generally exhausted and irritable. Our parties, needless to say, never went as we envisaged. No matter how we tried there was always some last-minute hitch that switched the points and sent our carefully arranged plans careering off on a completely different track from the one we had anticipated. We had, over the years, become used to this, which is just as well, for otherwise our Christmas party would have been doomed from the outset, for it was almost completely taken over by the animals.

It was on the morning of the party that things really started to happen. To begin with, Mother discovered that Dodo had chosen this day, of all days, to come into season. One of the peasant girls had to be detailed to stand outside the back door with a broom to repel suitors so that Mother could cook uninterruptedly, but even with this precaution there were occasional moments of panic when one of the bolder Romeos found a way into the kitchen via the front of the house.

By the time I had cleaned and fed Alecko, it was nearing lunch-time. The arrival of the first guests was imminent. I wandered round to where I had left the watersnakes in a tin, to discover, to my horror, that someone had moved them into the full glare of the sun. They lay on the surface of the water so limp and hot that for a moment I thought they were dead; it was obvious that only immediate first aid could save them, and picking up the tin I rushed into the house. Mother was in the kitchen, harassed and absent-minded, trying to divide her attention between the cooking and Dodo's followers.

I explained the plight of the snakes and said that the only

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thing that would save them was a long, cool immersion in the bath. Could I put them in the bath for an hour or so?

"Well, yes, dear; I suppose that would be all right. Make sure everyone's finished, though, and don't forget to disinfect it, will you?" she said.

I filled the bath with nice cool water and placed the snakes tenderly inside; in a few minutes they showed distinct signs of reviving. Feeling well satisfied, I sauntered out to have a look in at Alecko's cage and discovered with dismay that he had escaped. I hunted through the garden and all over the house, but he was nowhere to be seen. I thought he must have flown down to the sea for a quick swim, and felt relieved that he was out of the way.

By this time the first of the guests had arrived, and were drinking on the veranda. I joined them, and was soon deep in a discussion with Theodore; while we were talking, I was surprised to see Leslie appear out of the olive groves, his gun under his arm, carrying a string bag full of snipe, and a large hare. I had forgotten that he had gone out shooting in the hope of getting some early woodcock.

"Ah-ha!" said Theodore with relish, as Leslie vaulted over the veranda rail and showed us his game bag. "Is that your own hare or is it . . . um . . . a wig?"

"Theodore! You pinched that from Lamb!" said Larry accusingly.

"Yes . . . er . . . um . . . I'm afraid I did. But it seemed such a good *opportunity*," explained Theodore contritely.

Leslie disappeared into the house to change, and Theodore and I resumed our conversation. Mother appeared and seated herself on the wall, Dodo at her feet. Her gracious-hostess act was somewhat marred by the fact that she kept breaking off her conversation to grimace fiercely and brandish a large stick at the panting group of dogs gathered in the front garden. She had just succeeded in doing this for the third time when all talk was abruptly frozen again by a bellow from inside the house.

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"Whatever's the matter with Leslie?" asked Mother.

She was not left long in doubt, for he appeared on the veranda clad in nothing but a small towel.

"Gerry," he roared, his face a deep red with rage. "Where's that boy?"

"Now, *now*, dear," said Mother soothingly, "whatever's the matter?"

"Snakes," snarled Leslie, making a wild gesture with his hands to indicate extreme length, and then hastily clutching at his slipping towel, "snakes, that's what's the matter."

The effect on the guests was interesting. The ones that knew us were following the whole scene with avid interest; the uninitiated wondered if perhaps Leslie was a little touched, and were not sure whether to ignore the whole incident and go on talking, or to leap on him before he attacked someone.

"What *are* you talking about, dear?"

"That bloody *boy's* filled the sodding *bath* full of bleeding *snakes*," said Leslie, making things quite clear.

"Language, dear, language!" said Mother automatically, adding absently, "I do wish you'd put some clothes on; you'll catch a chill like that."

"Damn great things like *hosepipes*. . . . It's a wonder I wasn't bitten."

"Never mind, dear, it's really my fault. I told him to put them there," Mother apologized, and then added, feeling that the guests needed some explanation, "they were suffering from sunstroke, poor things. Gerry, you'd better go and take the snakes out of the bath. Put them in the basin or somewhere for the moment."

"No! They've got to go right outside!" roared Leslie.

"All right, dear; don't shout."

Eventually I borrowed a saucepan from the kitchen and put my water-snakes in that. They had, to my delight, recovered completely, and hissed vigorously when I removed them from the bath. On returning to the veranda I was in time to hear Larry holding forth at length to the assembled guests.

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"I assure you the house is a death-trap. Every conceivable nook and cranny is stuffed with malignant faunæ waiting to pounce. How I have escaped being maimed for life is beyond me. A simple, innocuous action like lighting a cigarette is fraught with danger. First, I was attacked by a scorpion, a hideous beast that dripped venom and babies all over the place. Now we have snakes in the bath and huge flocks of albatrosses flapping round the house, making noises like defective plumbing."

"Yes, well, we've talked quite enough about animals," said Mother hurriedly. "I think lunch is ready, so shall we all sit down?"

"Well, anyway," said Larry as we moved down the veranda to the table, "that boy's a menace . . . he's got beasts in his belfry."

The guests were shown their places, there was a loud scraping as chairs were drawn out, and then everyone sat down and smiled at each other. The next moment two of the guests uttered yells of agony and soared out of their seats, like rockets.

"Oh, dear, *now* what's happened?" asked Mother in agitation.

"It's probably scorpions again," said Larry, vacating his seat hurriedly.

"Something bit me . . . bit me in the leg!"

"There you are!" exclaimed Larry, looking round triumphantly. "*Exactly* what I said! You'll probably find a brace of bears there."

The only one not frozen with horror at the thought of some hidden menace lurking round his feet was Theodore, and he gravely bent down, lifted the cloth, and poked his head under the table.

"Ah-ha!" he said interestedly, his voice muffled.

"What is it?" asked Mother.

Theodore reappeared from under the cloth. "It seems to be some sort of a . . . er . . . some sort of a *bird*."

"It's that albatross!" said Larry excitedly

"No, no," corrected Theodore; "it's some species of *gull*."

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"Don't move . . . keep quite still, unless you want your legs taken off at the knee!" Larry informed the company.

As a statement calculated to quell alarm it left a lot to be desired. Everybody rose in a body and vacated the table.

From beneath the cloth Alecko gave a long, menacing yarp—whether in dismay at losing his victims or protest at the noise, it was difficult to say.

"Gerry, catch that bird up immediately!" commanded Larry from a safe distance.

"Yes, dear," Mother agreed. "You'd better put him back in his cage. He can't stay under there."

I gently lifted the edge of the cloth, and Alecko, squatting regally under the table, surveyed me with angry yellow eyes. I stretched out a hand towards him, and he lifted his wings and clicked his beak savagely. He was obviously in no mood to be trifled with. I got a napkin and started to try to manœuvre it towards his beak.

"Well, for heaven's sake hurry up; the soup's getting cold," snapped Larry irritably. "Can't you tempt the brute with something? What do they eat?"

"All the nice gulls love a sailor," observed Theodore with immense satisfaction.

"Oh, Theodore, please!" protested Larry, pained; "not in moments of crisis."

"It's probably hungry," said Theodore happily, "and the sight of us sitting down to eat was gull and wormwood to it."

"Theodore!"

I succeeded at last in getting a grip on Alecko's beak, and I hauled him screaming and flapping out from under the table. I was hot and dishevelled by the time I had pinioned his wings and carried him back to his cage. I left him there, screaming insults and threats at me, and went back to resume my interrupted lunch.

The glasses clinked, knives and forks clattered, and the wine-bottles glugged as we progressed through the meal. Delicacy after delicacy made its appearance, and after the guests had

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shown their unanimous approval of each dish Mother would smile deprecatingly.

Lunch over, the guests were too bloated with food to do anything except siesta on the veranda. A few of the more energetic of us got Spiro to drive us down for a swim, and we lolled in the sea until it was time to return for tea. Conversation was almost at a standstill; all that could be heard was the gentle tinkle of cups, and the heartfelt sigh of some guest, already stuffed to capacity, accepting another slice of cake. Afterwards we lay about on the veranda in little groups, talking in a desultory, dreamy fashion as the twilight deepened the shade beneath the vine.

Presently Spiro, who had been off in the car on some mysterious expedition of his own, came driving through the trees, his horn blaring to warn everything and everyone of his arrival.

"Why *does* Spiro have to shatter the evening calm with that ghastly noise?" inquired Larry in a pained voice.

"I remember being very puzzled," remarked Theodore's voice out of the shadows, with an undertone of amusement, "on the first occasion when I drove with Spiro. I can't recall exactly what the conversation was about, but he suddenly remarked to me, 'Yes, Doctors, peoples are scarce when I drive through a village.' I had a . . . um . . . curious mental picture of villages quite empty of people, and huge piles of corpses by the side of the road. Then Spiro went on, 'Yes, when I goes through a village I blows my horns like hells and scares them all to death.' "

The car stopped, the sound of the engine died away, and Spiro came waddling up the path, clutching an enormous and apparently heavy brown-paper parcel to his chest.

"Good God! Look!" exclaimed Larry dramatically, pointing a trembling finger. "The publishers have returned my manuscript again."

Spiro, on his way into the house, stopped and scowled over his shoulder. "Golly, nos, Master Lorrays," he explained seriously, "this is thems three turkeys my wifes cooked for your mothers."

"Ah, then there is still hope," sighed Larry in exaggerated

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relief; "the shock has made me feel quite faint. Let's all go inside and have a drink."

Inside, the rooms glowed with lamplight. Glasses started to titter and chime, corks popped with a sound like stones dropping into a well. The guests livened up; their eyes gleamed, the talk mounted into a crescendo.

Bored with the party, and being unable to attract Mother's attention, Dodo decided to pay a short visit to the garden by herself. She waddled out into the moonlight and chose a suitable patch beneath the magnolia tree to commune with nature. Suddenly, to her dismay, she was confronted by a pack of bristling, belligerent, and rough-looking dogs who obviously had the worst possible designs on her. With a yell of fright she turned tail and fled back into the house as quickly as her short, fat little legs would permit. Dodo galloped into the crowded drawing-room, screaming for help, and hot on her heels came the panting, snarling, barging wave of dogs. Roger, Puke, and Widdle, who had slipped off to the kitchen for a snack, returned with all speed and were horrified by the scene. If anyone was going to seduce Dodo, they felt, it was going to be one of them, not some scrawny village pariah. They hurled themselves with gusto upon Dodo's pursuers, and in a moment the room was a confused mass of fighting, snarling dogs and leaping hysterical guests trying to avoid being bitten.

"Keep calm, keep calm!" bellowed Leslie, as he seized a cushion and hurled it at the nearest knot of struggling dogs. The cushion landed and was immediately seized by five angry mouths and torn asunder. A great whirling cloud of feathers gushed up into the air and drifted over the scene.

"Where's Dodo?" quivered Mother. "Find Dodo; they'll hurt her."

"Stop them! Stop them! They're killing each other," shrilled Margo, and seizing a soda siphon she proceeded to spray both guests and dogs with complete impartiality.

"I believe *pepper* is a good thing for dog-fights," observed Theodore, the feathers settling on his beard like snow, "though

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of course I have never tried it *myself*. Water also is considered to be good," he went on musingly, and as if to test this he poured his glass of wine with meticulous accuracy over a passing dog.

Acting on Theodore's advice, Spiro surged out to the kitchen and returned with a kerosene tin of water clasped in his hamlike hands. He paused in the doorway and raised it above his head. "Watch outs," he roared.

The guests fled in all directions, but they were not quick enough. The polished, glittering mass of water curved through the air and hit the floor like a tidal wave. It had the most disastrous results as far as the nearest guests were concerned, but it had the most startling and instantaneous effect on the dogs. Frightened by the boom and swish of water, they let go of each other and fled out into the night, leaving behind them a scene of carnage that was breath-taking. The room looked like a hen-roost that had been hit by a cyclone; our friends milled about, damp and feather-encrusted; feathers had settled on the lamps and the acrid smell of burning filled the air.

Mother, clasping Dodo in her arms, surveyed the room. "Leslie, dear, go and get some towels so that we can dry ourselves. The room *is* in a mess. Never mind, let's all go out onto the veranda, shall we?" she said, and added sweetly, "I'm so sorry this happened. It's Dodo, you see; she's very *interesting* to the dogs at the moment."

Eventually the party was dried, the feathers plucked off them, their glasses were filled, and they were installed on the veranda where the moon was stamping the flags with ink-black shadows of the vine leaves. Larry, his mouth full of food, strummed softly on his guitar and hummed indistinctly; through the French windows we could see Leslie and Spiro both scowling with concentration, skilfully dismembering the great brown turkey; Mother drifted to and fro through the shadows, anxiously asking everyone if they were getting enough to eat.

Outside, the island was striped and patched in black and silver by moonlight. Far down in the dark cypress trees the owls called to each other comfortingly. The sky looked as black and

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soft as a mole-skin covered with a delicate dew of stars. The magnolia tree loomed vast over the house, its branches full of white blooms, like a hundred miniature reflections of the moon, and their thick, sweet scent hung over the veranda languorously, the scent that was an enchantment luring you out into the mysterious, moonlit countryside.



THE RETURN

The time had come, Mother thought, for me to go to somewhere like England or Switzerland to finish my education. In desperation I argued against any such idea; I said I *liked* being half-educated; you were so much more *surprised* at everything when you were ignorant. But Mother was adamant. We were to return to England and spend a month or so there consolidating our position (which meant arguing with the bank) and then we would decide where I was to continue my studies. In order to quell the angry mutterings of rebellion in the family she told us that we should look upon it merely as a holiday, a pleasant trip. We should soon be back again in Corfu.

So our boxes, bags, and trunks were packed, cages were made for birds and tortoises, and the dogs looked uncomfortable and slightly guilty in their new collars. The last walks were taken among the olives, the last tearful good-byes exchanged with our numerous peasant friends, and then the cars, piled high with our possessions, moved slowly down the drive in procession, looking, as Larry pointed out, rather like the funeral of a successful rag-and-bone merchant.

Our mountain of possessions was arranged in the customs shed, and Mother stood by it jangling an enormous bunch of keys. Outside in the brilliant white sunlight the rest of the family talked with Theodore, who had come to see us off.

The customs man surveyed Mother and the luggage, tightened

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his belt, and frowned. "Theese your?" he inquired, making quite sure.

"Yes, yes, all mine," twittered Mother, playing a rapid solo on her keys. "Did you want me to open anything?"

The customs man considered, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Hoff yew any noo clooes?" he asked.

"I'm sorry?" said Mother.

"Hoff yew any noo clooes?"

Mother smiled with desperate charm. "I'm sorry I can't quite . . ."

The customs man fixed her with an angry eye.

"Madame," he said ominously, leaning over the counter, "do yew spik English?"

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Mother, delighted at having understood him, "yes, a *little*."

She was saved from the wrath of the man by the timely arrival of Spiro. He lumbered in, sweating profusely, soothed Mother, calmed the customs man, explained that we had not had any new clothes for years, and had the luggage shifted outside onto the quay almost before anyone could draw a breath. Then he borrowed the customs man's piece of chalk and marked all the baggage himself, so there would be no further confusion.

"Well, I won't say good-bye but only *au revoir*," mumbled Theodore, shaking hands precisely with each of us. "I hope we shall have you back with us . . . um . . . *very soon*."

Spiro shook each of us silently by the hand, and then stood staring at us, his face screwed up into the familiar scowl, twisting his cap in his huge hands.

"Wells, I'll says good-byes," he began and his voice wavered and broke, great fat tears squeezing themselves from his eyes and running down his furrowed cheeks. "Honest to Gods, I didn't means to cry," he sobbed, his vast stomach heaving, "but it's just likes saying goods-bye to my own peoples. I feels you belongs to me."

The tender had to wait patiently while we comforted him. Then, as the engine throbbed and it drew away across the dark

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blue water, our friends stood out against the multicoloured background, the tottering houses sprawled up the hillside, Theodore neat and erect, his stick raised in grave salute, his beard twinkling in the sun; Spiro, barrel-bodied and scowling, alternately wiping his eyes with his handkerchief and waving it to us.

As the ship drew across the sea and Corfu sank shimmering into a pearly heat haze on the horizon a black depression settled on us, which lasted all the way back to England. The grimy train scuttled its way up from Brindisi towards Switzerland, and we sat in silence, not wishing to talk. Above our heads, on the rack, Alecko gave a mournful yarp at intervals. Around our feet the dogs lay snoring. At the Swiss frontier our passports were examined by a disgracefully efficient official. He handed them back to Mother, together with a small slip of paper, bowed unsmilingly, and left us to our gloom. Some moments later Mother glanced at the form the official had filled in, and as she read it, she stiffened.

"Just look what he's put," she exclaimed indignantly, "*impertinent* man."

Larry stared at the little form and snorted. "Well, that's the penalty you pay for leaving Corfu," he pointed out.

On the little card, in the column headed *Description of Passengers* had been written, in neat capitals: ONE TRAVELLING CIRCUS AND STAFF.

"What a thing to write," said Mother, still simmering. "Really, some people are *peculiar*."

The train rattled towards England.

